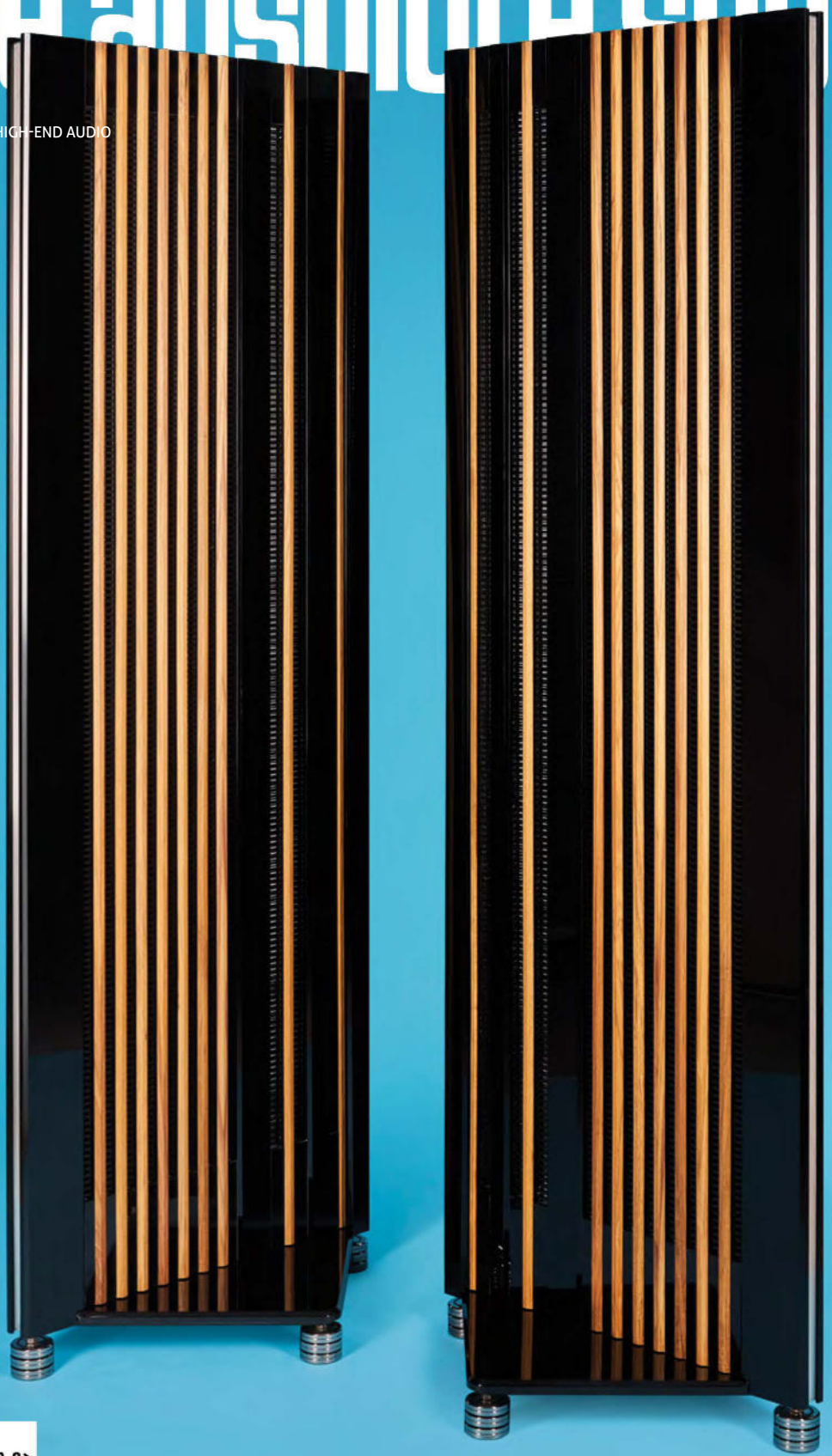
the absolute sound

THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

JULY/AUGUST 2024



JULY/AUGUST 2024

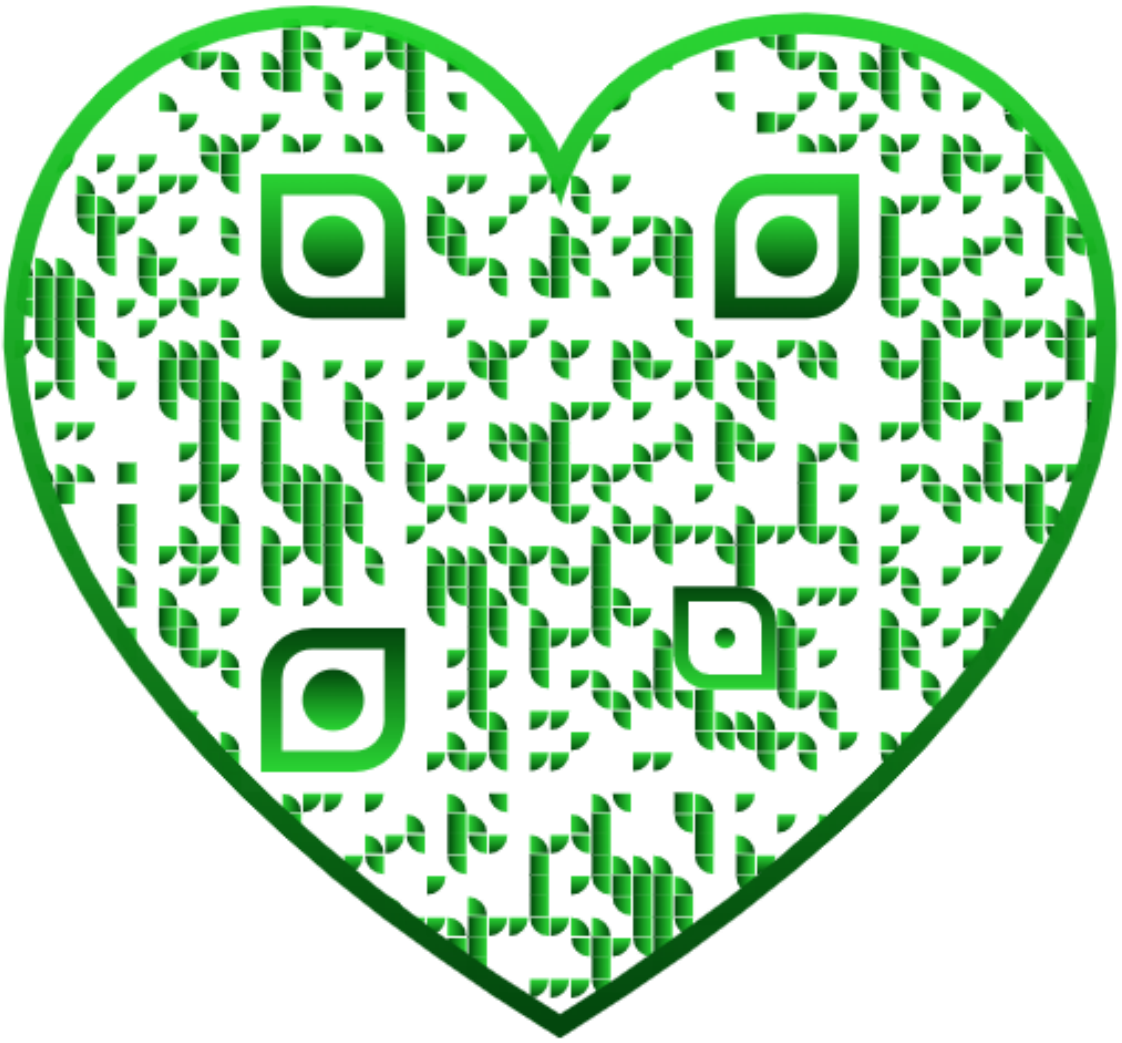
$8.99 US / $10.99 CAN

0 74470 64765 2 08>

DISPLAY UNTIL AUGUST 25, 2024

AlsyVox Caravaggio Full-Range Ribbon Loudspeaker

15 Pages of Music Reviews



Power Is Fundamental

Audio and Video are "Simply" Modulated Power

As with our famous Niagara power products, our PowerQuest power conditioners include Non-Sacrificial Surge Protection and Extreme-Voltage Automatic Shutdown. Set & forget, free from concern about catastrophic surges as well as ever-present micro-spikes.

But what really matters is lower noise, and greater clarity and dynamic contrast — more to love about your audio and video::

- Linear Noise-Dissipation Technology provides linear wide-bandwidth noise reduction
- Included detachable Direction-Controlled Long-Grain Copper AC power cables maximize RF-noise dissipation and minimize current-compression
- PQ-707 only: Transient Power Correction and 45-amp on-demand current reservoir enable Niagara-level in-your-gut dynamics and jump-factor

After spending quality time with the PQ-303 in his system, *The Absolute Sound's* Aaron Jenkins marveled over the newly expansive soundstages, wealth of natural detail, and improved bass definition.

He concluded simply, **"With a PQ-303 in place, my system just sounds better."**

PowerQuest 303: US$459.95
PowerQuest 505: US$699.95
PowerQuest 707: US$1,299.95

audioquest

Contents

ISSUE 350

the absolute sound

THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

p.22

Hot New Gear at the AXPONA Show

Jonathan Valin, Robert Harley, Andrew Quint, and Andre Jennings bring you a full report from North America's premier hi-fi event.

Contents

ISSUE 350

the absolute sound
THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

p.54

Wilson Benesch GMT® One System Turntable

Michael Fremer offers an in-depth assessment of this heroic new design, 10 years in the making.

20
MAGICO

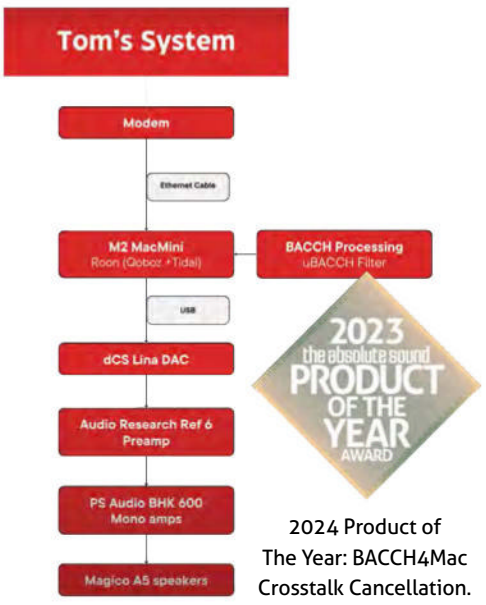
Contents

ISSUE 350

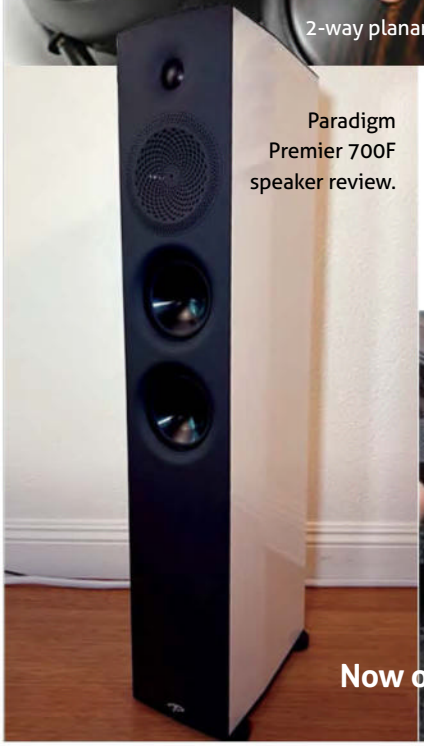
the absolute sound
THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

200W monoblocks for $1599: Schiit Audio Tyr review.

2-way planar headphones: New Meze Liric II review.



2024 Product of The Year: BACCH4Mac Crosstalk Cancellation.



Paradigm Premier 700F speaker review.

New Hegel H190v streamer/DAC/ amplifier review.

Michael Fremer reviews the new Rega Naia turntable.

Now on *The Absolute Sound* YouTube Channel

"RICH NEW MEANING"

ROBERT HARLEY, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND, ISSUE 295

BASIS

THE A.J. CONTI TRANSCENDENCE

BASIS B

BASISAUDIO.COM / 603.889.4776

HAND-BUILT IN THE USA FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS

GO BEYOND THE BOOM

KEF Listen and believe

There are subwoofers.
And there are KEF Subwoofers.

Beyond conventional bass, KEF redefines immersive audio by adding the missing piece: accuracy.

KEF's comprehensive range of subwoofers deliver depth and detail in equal measures. Room-friendly designs and innovative technology keep them ahead of the pack, so it's just a case of selecting the one that best suits your needs.

Our KEF dealers are here to help transform your audio experience - this way you won't miss a thing.

★ **AVIQ**
Huntsville, AL
256-713-8912

Laguna Audio
Cave Creek, CA
949-632-6436

Audio Video Evolution
Campbell, CA
408-628-0771

C & M Sales
Palmdale, CA
661-965-3469

Cinematec
Eastvale, CA
951-675-0148

ROCK ON AV
Irvine, CA
818-305-4225

SmarTek Home
San Diego, CA
858-874-8700

The Audio Store
Newington, CT
860-666-5006

★ **Wave Media Systems**
Winter Garden, FL
407-909-3388

HiFi Buys
Atlanta, GA
770-931-0606

★ **Modus AV**
Suwanee, GA
404-471-3779

★ **Luminaire Smart Homes & Theater**
Boise, ID
208-781-8301

★ **Holm Audio**
Woodridge, IL
630-663-1298

Vision Security & Technology
Carmel, IN
877-546-8279

Tech Hifi
Hanson, MA
781-293-2860

★ **Gramophone**
Columbia, MD
410-381-2100

★ **Gramophone**
Timonium, MD
410-308-1650

★ **The Audio Hunters**
Simpsonville, MD
301-848-9700

★ **Stereoland**
Bloomington, MN
952-829-9700

★ **Audio Advice**
Raleigh, NC
919-881-2005

★ **Audio Advice**
Pineville, NC
704-821-4510

★ **Rein's Audio Video Therapy**
Nashua, NH
603-888-9777

★ **Electronics Expo**
Wayne, NJ
973-785-1112

Woodbridge Stereo
Woodbridge, NJ
732-636-7777

★ **Hippo's HiFi**
Albany, NY
518-482-1864

★ **Genesis Audio**
Gahanna, OH
614-939-0802

Pure AV
Akron, OH
330-907-9970

The Groove - A Smart Spaces Experience
Oklahoma, OK
405-752-1115

★ **Quest for Sound**
Bensalem, PA
215-953-9099

Home Definition
Sioux Falls, SD
605-335-3776

★ **Origin HiFi**
Austin, TX
737-787-4434

★ **IQ Home Entertainment**
Fairfax, VA
703-218-9855

Platinum Micro Electronics
Manassas, VA
703-368-4584

High Note Audio
Tacoma, WA
253-465-9544

Hawthorne Stereo
Seattle, WA
206-522-9609

★ **Olson's Hi-Fi**
Lynnwood, WA
206-462-5227

★ **Sound World**
Appleton, WI
920-733-8539

★ = Elite Dealer

Scan and find a dealer near you.

Contents

ISSUE 350

the absolute sound

THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

110
***Getz/Gilberto* Revisited**
Are you searching for the definitive version of the most important Bossa Nova album ever recorded? Neil Gader has a suggestion.

112
The Past Recaptured
Bill Milkowski explores some previously unreleased recordings by important jazz musicians and "The Godmother of Rock 'n' Roll."

116
Rael Against The World
Jeff Wilson discusses the new Analogue Productions reissue of *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* by Genesis.

118
Rock
Pearl Jam, Mark Knopfler, Kacey Musgraves, Kim Gordon, Norah Jones, Mike Zito, Brittany Howard, Tinsley Ellis, Adrianne Lenker, Julia Holter, Pernice Brothers, and Nico.

126
Jazz
Julian Lage, Art Tatum, Alice Coltrane, Chris Potter, John Surman, Nat King Cole, Musica Nuda, John Lurie, and Cory Weeds with Champian Fulton.

132
Classical
Gustav Mahler, Eugène Ysaÿe, Georg Solti, the Takács Quartet, Henri Dutilleux, and Mélanie Bonis.

the absolute sound

Editor-in-Chief
Robert Harley
Executive Editor
Jonathan Valin
Acquisitions Manager and Associate Editor
Neil Gader
Editor-at-Large
Michael Fremer
Music Editor
Jeff Wilson
Proofreader
Diana Nagler
Creative Director
Torquil Dewar
Art Director
Shelley Lai
Senior Writers
Wayne Garcia, Robert E. Greene, Jacob Heilbrunn, Andre Jennings, Arthur Lintgen, Tom Martin, Kirk Midtskog, Dick Olsher, Andrew Quint, Paul Seydor, Steven Stone, Alan Taffel

Reviewers and Contributing Writers
Duck Baker, Soren Baker, Rives Bird, Hannah Blanchette, Peter Burwasser, Greg Cahill, Matt Clott, Randall Couch, Stephen Estep, Greg Gaston, Jerika Hayes, Drew Kalbach, Muse Kastanovich, Mark Lehman, Sherri Lehman, Ted Libbey, David McGee, Mark Milano, Bill Milkowski, Malgorzata Quinn, Derk Richardson, Pam Torno, Greg Turner

nextscreen
Nextscreen Chairman and CEO
Tom Martin
Publisher
Lance Profyt
Advertising Reps
Cheryl Smith (512) 891-7775
Brian Masamoto (310) 498-5245
Chief Digital Content Officer
Tom Martin
Digital Managing Editor
Charles Kinder
Digital Content Manager
Garrett Whitten
Senior Digital Content Contributors
Cynthia Blankenship, Michael Fremer, Aaron Jenkins, Michael Johnson, Chris Martens, Steven Stone, Andrew Quint, Thomas Tan

Reprints: Contact your advertising sales representative.
Subscriptions, renewals, changes of address: (888) 732-1625 and outside the U.S. (760) 317-2327 or visit theabsolutesound.com
Eleven issues: in the U.S., $29.90; Canada $57.90 GST included); outside North America, $84.90. Payments must be by credit card (VISA, MasterCard, American Express) or U.S. funds drawn on a U.S. bank, with checks payable to NextScreen, LLC.
Address letters to the editor: The Absolute Sound, 1801 Red Bud Lane, Suite B, P.O. Box 164, Round Rock, TX, 78664, (866) 846-3997; e-mail: rharley@nextscreen.com

Publishing matters: Contact Lance Profyt at the Nextscreen address below or lprofyt@nextscreen.com
Publications Mail Agreement 40600599.
Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses to: Station A, P.O. Box 54, Windsor, ON N9A 6J5.
Nextscreen, LLC, 1801 Red Bud Lane, Suite B, P.O. Box 164, Round Rock, TX, 78664
(512) 892-8682
tas@nextscreen.com,
info@theabsolutesound.com

©2024 Nextscreen, LLC., Issue 350, July/August 2024.
The Absolute Sound (ISSN #0097-1138) is published 11 times per year in the months of Jan, Feb, Mar, Apr, May/Jun, Jul/Aug, Fall, Sept, Oct, Nov, Dec, $29.90 per year for U.S. residents,
Nextscreen, LLC, 1801 Red Bud Lane, Suite B, P.O. Box 164, Round Rock, TX, 78664.
Periodical Postage paid at Austin, Texas, and additional mailing offices.
Canadian publication mail account #1551566
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Absolute Sound, Subscription Services, P.O. Box 1871, Williamsport, PA 17703.
Printed in the USA.

dCS
ONLY THE MUSIC

LINA 2.0

Over the past 12 months, we've released several performance upgrades and new features for dCS owners. We delivered a major firmware upgrade for the dCS Bartók and launched the next generation Bartók APEX. We also added digital volume control and volume lock to the dCS Lina Network DAC, allowing listeners to use the DAC as a pre-amplifier in two-channel audio setups.

The Lina Network DAC 2.0 update brings several new features that are designed to enhance performance, aid ease of use, and give listeners more control over their playback experience.

It is available to new and existing Lina Network DAC owners and is provided free of charge.

Supporting streamed and wired digital sources up to 384kHz/DSD128, the Lina DAC is the beating heart of the system, and employs dCS's proven Ring DAC technology to bring music to life with remarkable clarity and detail—while perseving your music's organic beauty.

Now available in silver.

Pictured: Lina DAC (top), optional Master Clock (bottom)

dCSonlythemusic

Contents

ISSUE 350

the absolute sound®

THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

Absolute Analog

70
Analog Audio TP-1000 Open-Reel Tape Deck
Jonathan Valin hits the play button on this ingenious, all-new, fairly affordable, French 15ips reel-to-reel tape player with a sound that is absolutely gorgeous.

Equipment Reports

78
Dutch & Dutch 8c Powered Loudspeaker with DSP and BACCH Processing
The remarkable BACCH spatial processing system is now available in a self-contained power loudspeaker from Dutch & Dutch. Andrew Quint reports.

p. 88

88
B.audio Alpha Integrated Amplifier
Neil Gader listens to this upper-end integrated amp from France's B.audio.

94
AlsyVox Caravaggio XX Loudspeaker
There's never been a full-range ribbon speaker quite like the Caravaggio from Spanish manufacturer AlsyVox. Robert Harley reports on this *sui generis* creation that overcomes the traditional limitations of the genre—with stunning results.

p.78

Departments

12
Letters

14
From the Editor
Robert Harley shares what it's like to go on a music cruise.

16
Future TAS
New products on the horizon.

p. 16

18
Vintage Ads
We take a nostalgic—and sometimes appalling—look back at hi-fi ads from yesteryear.

136
Q&A
We talk with Kevin Deal, owner of Upscale Audio.

p.18

WADAX

STUDIO • **PLAYER**

Start a [R]evolution

wadax.eu

Letters

Email the Editor: rharley@nextscreen.com or: TAS, 2211 Denton Dr., Ste. J, Austin, Texas 78758

An Unlikely—but Useful—Reference

Robert Greene's April review of the Cabasse Abyss integrated amplifier [*Issue 348*] had lots of great information, but what really got my attention and put a big smile on my face was his mention of using audience coughs as part of his evaluation. I thought I was the only one who did this! Every time I tweak my system, I listen to my favorite Tchaikovsky violin concerto with coughs everywhere in the concert hall. When I hear them loud and clear and in all the right locations, I know my setup is correct.

Rick Seaman

Golden Ears vs. Meter Readers

The dispute between the measurement guys and the listener guys will never go away [*From the Editor, Issue 345*]. The measurement guys "know" that if it can't be measured, it doesn't exist. This attitude ignores the fact that in almost any realm that matters to humans, measurements are impossible. Give me a measurement that can distinguish the music of The Beatles from the Bay City Rollers, a great novel from a potboiler, a Van Gogh from the works of a Sunday painter, the intensity of love between a man and a woman. These sorts of distinctions require the subtleties of the mind—in other words, sensitivity, training, and very likely years of experience. They cannot be condensed into formulas or algorithms.

On several long drives recently, I listened to an audiobook version of *Personal Knowledge* [*a book I quoted in my editorial—RH*]. As you point out, [*author*] Michael Polanyi repeatedly emphasizes that tacit knowledge (which cannot be put into words) is crucially important, even in the physical sciences. It is the summation of a trained observer's instinct, gut feeling, and intuition. It's not measurable but vastly important. And he was just talking about the hard sciences.

Your emphasis on listening can be the only effective foundation for assembling an audio system that produces true musicality.

Laszlo Bencze

Happy Wilson Sasha V Owner

Being a happy owner of a pair of Wilson Audio's Sasha V's for about a half year, I read with great interest Alan Taffel's enthusiastic and detailed review in Issue 348. My very positive experiences parallel those of Mr. Taffel. Please permit me to add two additional observations. The first is that with the right sources the Sasha Vs will project an image that is roughly seven to eight feet tall and markedly taller than the speakers. Examples include many recordings of the Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square (Brahms *German Requiem*, Ormandy/Philadelphia Orch., Columbia-Sony, reissue CD of M2S 686; various Blu-ray Discs of MTC Christmas programs; etc.) with gratifying image width, depth, and definition. Streamed concerts of the Berlin Philharmoniker via Digital Concert Hall and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra will usually sonically project images that are notably taller than the speakers. The second comment that I would add is that as wonderful as the Sashas are after about 100 hours of playback, further significant improvements are made as the speakers settle in after about six months of listening (which is not terribly unusual). Thank you for a great issue in general and to Mr. Taffel for a well-done review.

Robert Bubeck

Tribute to Koetsu

I have been reading *The Absolute Sound* since the beginning. What a great magazine. Now that Koetsu is no longer with us, I would like to see a tribute article to these artisans who created some of the most desired phono cartridges ever made.

Thomas Cordero

Deutsche Grammophon Reissues

As a reader of your magazine, I would enjoy an article discussing the history and recent production of the "Originals" by DGG. The CDs released as part of this series were quite poor in my opinion, with little depth and tone color. In fact, I have made CDs from the LPs, which are far better than the CDs sold by DGG. Having purchased several LPs of these new releases of this series, I can attest to their far superior sonics over the original releases in the early 70s.

Steve Livingston

Setting the Record Straight

Just for the sake of history, I suspect the Vandersteen 2 speaker has to be demoted to number two in the audio-speaker sales competition [*Vandersteen Model Seven XTRM review in Issue 349*]. The Dynaco A25 certainly must be considered audiophile quality, and my memory is Dynaco sold at least twice as many A25s as Vandersteen 2s over a much shorter time period. But both speakers accomplished much the same thing—introducing thousands of audiophiles to good sound at affordable prices.

Allen Edelstein

UPCOMING IN TAS

TAS 351
- **2024 Ultimate Directory to Loudspeakers and Cables**

TAS 352
- **The 2024 Golden Ear Awards**
- **Full report from the Munich show**
- **Simaudio Moon 641 Integrated Amp and 681 Streaming DAC**
- **Luxman D-07x Disc player/DAC**
- **Rega Naia turntable**
- **Estelon XB Diamond Mk II loudspeaker**

Genuine GoldenEar

Honoring our rich history while moving boldly forward…

The **T66** — an all-new GoldenEar floorstander with powered bass.

Many important sonic and visual refinements distinguish the new T66 from previous GoldenEar speakers.

Foremost is a dramatically improved crossover design, Noise-Dissipation enabled distortion-minimized internal wiring, two sets of binding posts for BiWiring, a strongest-yet cabinet with see-through metal grille, and an easily adjustable sturdy cast-aluminum base with a choice of spikes or soft feet.

In addition to GoldenEar's trademark Gloss Black finish, the T66 is also available in vibrant Santa Barbara Red.

Genuine GoldenEar, dramatically evolved — a speaker to live with and to love.

GoldenEar™

From the Editor

An Unforgettable Experience

When asked about my recent vacation and I reply that I went on a music cruise, the universal response is, "What's a music cruise?"

Until very recently, I'd also never heard of a music cruise. Here's how it works. A company books an entire cruise ship, puts together a slate of bands and performers within a specific genre, and sells cabins to music fans. For the music enthusiast, this translates to four or more days of nearly non-stop musical performances spread out across many venues, accompanied by all the other pleasures of cruise travel—the food, fresh air, open sea, and port excursions. You wake up, hit the buffet, and go from venue to venue enjoying live music all day and night. I saw more live music in four days than I'd normally see in a year. There's no jockeying for tickets, driving to a site, parking, and other hassles.

These themed cruises are extremely popular—you can find music cruises for smooth jazz, mainstream jazz, Broadway show tunes, "Botti at Sea" (Chris Botti and others), heavy metal, and "Legends of Rock," to name a few. The cruise I took is called "Keeping the Blues Alive at Sea," put on by the great blues guitarist Joe Bonamassa, who headlined the 20-band lineup. This was his ninth annual cruise, which sells out days after it is announced.

After my four-night trip, I can see why. The mid-sized Norwegian Pearl has eight music venues ranging from the festival-style outdoor pool deck to a 900-seat theater, to a mid-sized lounge, to an intimate club. One of the best parts of the experience was discovering an artist in a smaller venue who was previously unknown to me. One such musician was the Belgian slide-guitarist and songwriter Ghalia Volt, who put on an electrifying show. After busking in her home country, she moved to the American South to trace the roots of the music she loved, settling in Clarksville, Mississippi. She had the audience on their feet, dancing in the aisles. There's something magical about experiencing live music in the moment, particularly when you're just a few feet from the artist.

I also enjoyed being in the company of such hard-core music fans, most of whom had their favorite bands or concert performances emblazoned on T-shirts. You must be a serious enthusiast to spend your vacation time and money on a music cruise. Nearly everyone was in their early fifties to early eighties, the generation that grew up in an era when music was a central part of our lives. When you moved house, the last thing to get packed and the first thing to get set up was the stereo. It was also, perhaps not incidentally, the era of blues-based chord progressions. All of us on the ship were charter members of the same tribe, which fostered an atmosphere of conviviality and celebration. People in line at the bar, for a venue, or at the buffet enthusiastically shared stories with strangers about shows they'd seen, often prompted by someone's concert T-shirt. This appreciation for the music was apparent in the crowd's enthusiasm for the performances, which in turn spurred the musicians to greater heights. The performers clearly enjoyed playing for such appreciative audiences, amping up the joyous vibe. The setting also provided the opportunity for musicians to sit in with each other and create some thrilling spontaneous sets.

I'm already planning my next cruise through Jazz Cruises LLC. The company, founded in 2001, produces seven cruises a year, each appealing to a different jazz sub-genre. The company can trace its origins to the first jazz cruise nearly 50 years ago, sponsored by Norwegian Cruise Line. NCL ran a successful series of jazz cruises for nearly 20 years, combining top talent with luxury accommodations. Jazz Cruises has taken up the mantle, and now boasts that more than 17,000 of its guests have taken four or more music cruises on its ships. Their newest program, Journey of Jazz '25, sails from Vancouver, BC, with stops in Victoria, BC, and San Francisco, ending in Los Angeles.

I'm surprised that music cruises aren't better known given that taking one is such an unforgettable experience. On the shore excursion in Cozumel, Mexico, we got to talking with a German couple from a German cruise ship. When he learned that our ship was filled with first-rate musicians performing all day and night, he immediately leapt at the idea and told me how much more appealing that sounded than the generic "entertainment" on his ship. He was a real music enthusiast (we talked about Coltrane and Dexter Gordon) and said a jazz cruise was his idea of a perfect vacation.

After my first music cruise, it has become mine.

Robert Harley

ALIDA
CSC
WILSON AUDIO
50
YEARS

Weiss Helios Reference DAC

The Helios Reference DAC brings pro performance and versatility to the high end, even exceeding the bar set by the DAC501/502. Digital processing is performed by the 8-channel ES9038PRO chip, utilizing four DAC channels in parallel per channel for an unmatched S/N ratio of 128dB, with superb channel separation and noise rejection. Unique DSP algorithms can be activated to suppress room modes, correct less than optimal recordings, in particular de-essing, which removes excessive sibilance. A powerful non-switching power supply utilizes two toroidal transformers. All sensitive voltages have their own regulators, which are separated between left and right channels, key to reducing digital noise and channel crosstalk. The analog output stages utilize Weiss' own discrete op-amps. All five digital inputs accept professional or consumer signals. Helios is Roon Ready and comes standard with a full-function remote control.

Price: $21,995. bluebirdmusic.com

Nagra Reference Turntable

The Reference turntable from Nagra follows in the footsteps of Nagra's Reference Anniversary turntable. It features a 25-pound, Swiss-made, CNC-machined, dual-decoupled, super-cap motor-drive system, a spheroidal graphite iron shaft/bearing housing, and a bearing composed of ultra-high-polished, stacked-carbide balls. The platter is aerospace-grade aluminum/phenolic and is constrained-layer damped with an Alcantara platter surface. The belt transmission was inspired by the legendary Nagra IV series reel-to-reel recorders. There's a non-resonant, high-rigidity, constrained-layer chassis and a floating mechanical and hydraulic suspension, plus an HD-sized chassis linear power supply featuring an oversized medical-grade transformer and ultra-low-noise regulators. The tonearm is a dual-concentric carbon-fiber uni-pivot with unique geometrical bearing profile and unique no-contact magnetic anti-skating. Although designed to work from the "ground up" as a unified playback system, Nagra offers an armless version with arm-board options to accommodate most tonearms.

Price: $128,000. nagraaudio.com

Magico S5 2024 Loudspeaker

Magico's new S5 2024 is three-way, four-driver loudspeaker featuring a shaped aluminum cabinet to maximize stiffness and optimize damping. The front baffle is curved to minimize diffraction effects. Notably, the S5's internal volume was increased by 31% over its predecessor, enabling low-frequency response to extend 5Hz lower—to 20Hz—with the same sensitivity (88dB). New diaphragms use an aluminum-honeycomb core sandwiched by graphene-reinforced carbon-fiber skins. These Nano-Tec v.8 cones' revolutionary core structure allows thinner diaphragms, lighter weight, and more effective damping. The S5's 6" midrange uses a 3" voice coil with two extra-large neodymium magnets, a copper cap, and a titanium voice coil. There's a pair of 10" woofers with 5" titanium voice coils, and the 28mm tweeter uses a diamond-coated beryllium diaphragm with a neodymium motor system. In celebrating Magico's 20th anniversary, S5 orders placed in 2024 include a special aluminum accessory box that's engraved with serial numbers and the "20" anniversary logo.

Price: $74,500, Softec; $83,000, gloss. magico.net

MEET THE NEXT GENERATION

It's taken 10 years for Soulution to improve on the 725. Now the new Soulution 727 is redefining what's possible for preamp performance.

2023 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

SOULUTION 727 PREAMP

Closer to Reality Than Ever Before

LOWEST NOISE FLOOR
At -160dB, the 727 sets the new world standard for noise floor, -20dB better than the 725

NEAR PERFECT TIMING
Phase shift of less than 0.1 degrees from 20Hz–20Khz gives 727 unparalleled lifelike imaging

NEW POWER SUPPLY
New breakthrough in power supply architecture reduces energy waste AND greatly extends service life

OPTIONAL PHONO MODULE
Now with greater gain, lower noise, and full logic control of cartridge loading

HEAR IT AT AXPONA | ROOMS 1632 (ASTER SUITE) & 1628

soulution nature of sound

Visit axissaudio.com or call 866-295-4133 to find an authorized Soulution dealer nearest to you

AXISS AUDIO
axissaudio.com

FEATURE

Vintage Hi-Fi Ads

A nostalgic remembrance of audio advertising past.

CLEARAUDIO Signature

THE NEW STANDARD FOR PERFORMANCE AND VALUE

Encoder Motor Controller, TSC Speed Regulation
Integrated Auto-Calibration, IMS O-ring Motor Suspension

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS 33 1/3
EST. 1991 - OAKLAND, CA
MUSICALSURROUNDINGS.COM | 510.547.5006

clearaudio
CLEARAUDIO
MADE IN GERMANY

101 X-Treme
MKII
Learn more
mbl-northamerica.com

2023 OVERALL PRODUCT OF THE YEAR
2024 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

mbl

This changes everything!

Again and again and again

Given the time, the patience, and the money, one can connect* fifty 303 amplifiers nose to tail so that the programme goes through one after the other gradually deteriorating along the way.

Deteriorating? The fact is, that apart from a very slight background hiss – akin to a good tape recording – the programme will sound exactly the same at the end as when it started.

*Of course one must fit an attenuator to redu the signal back to its original level between e amplifier.

Send postcard for illustrated leaflet to Dept.C Acoustical Manufacturing Co. Ltd., Huntingdon PE18 7DB. Telephone (0480) 52

QUAD

Products of The Acoustical Manufacturing Co. Ltd.
for the closest approach to the original sound

IF THERE'S A MAXELL CASSETTE IN THIS CAR AND IT DOESN'T WORK, WE'LL REPLACE IT.

If you own a car stereo, you've probably already discovered that many cassette tapes don't last as long in your car as they do in your living room.

Conditions like heat, cold, humidity, and even potholes can contribute to a cassette's premature demise.

At Maxell, our cassette shells are built to standards that are as much as 60% higher than the industry calls for. Which is why we can offer you the best guarantee in the industry. An unconditional lifetime warranty.

So if you'd like better mileage out of your cassette tape, try Maxell. Even after 100,000 miles on the road, it'll run like new.

If only they made cars this well.

maxell

IT'S WORTH IT.

THEY ALL *Sound* BETTER WITH A

McIntosh

WORLD'S FINEST AUDIO AMPLIFIER

50 WATT AMPLIFIER

50 WATTS
(peak: 100)
50W-2
$249.50

Unequalled for quality reproduction of any sound source, the McIntosh is the most advanced amplifier of the day. Its unique, compact design offers: HIGHEST EFFICIENCY—over 65%; LESS THAN 1% DISTORTION AT PEAK POWER; DYNAMIC RANGE: OVER 70 db; FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 20-20,000 cps.

20 WATTS (Peak: 40)
20W-2 - $149.50

AE-2 Amplifier
Equalizer - $74.50

SEND FOR *Free* CATALOG Dept. A-5

McINTOSH ENGINEERING LABORATORIES, Inc. 320 WATER STREET BINGHAMTON, N.Y.

CrystalCable®

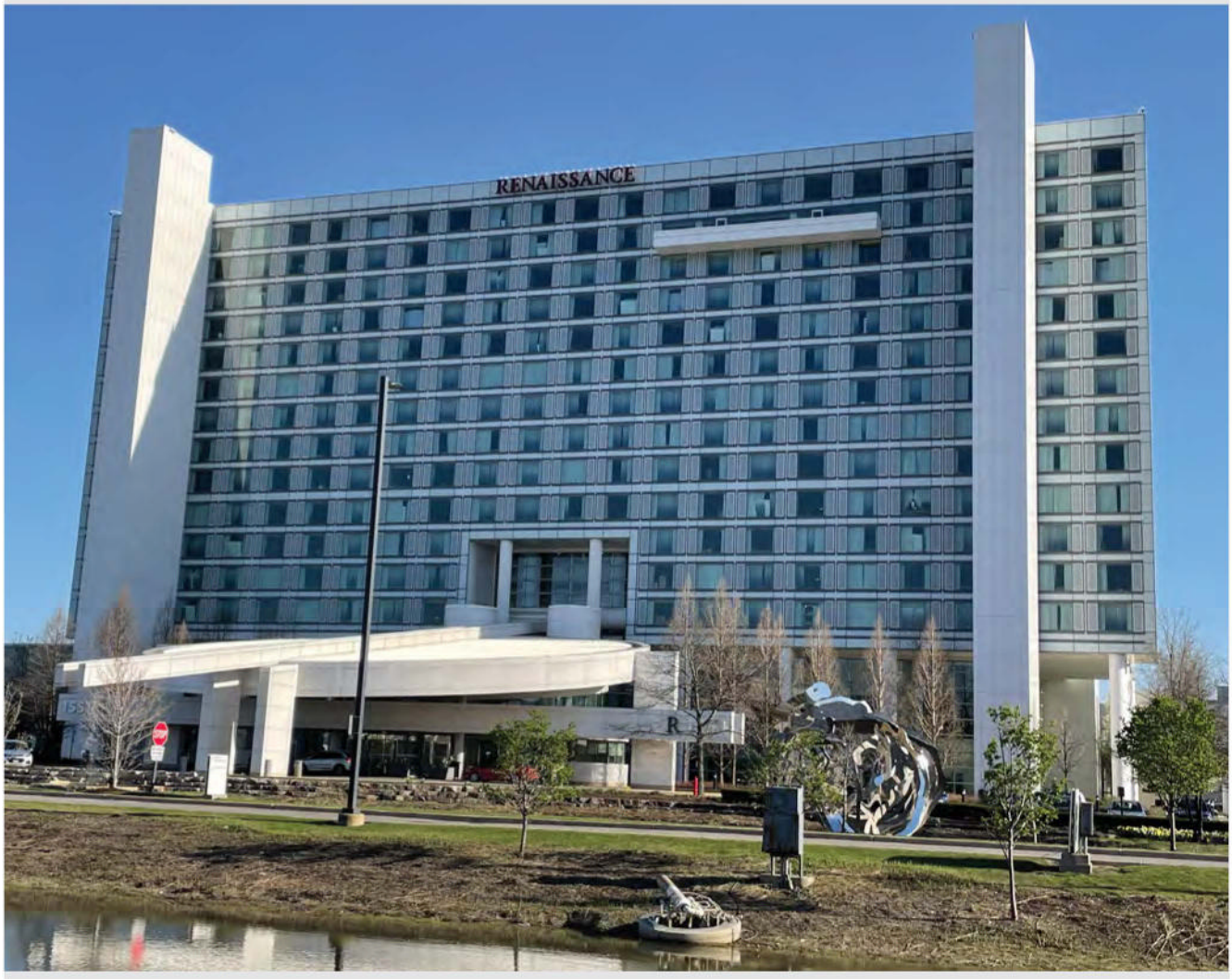
20 YEAR ANNIVERSARY

THE POWER OF INFINITY

Limited Edition

www.crystalcable.com

U.S. inquiries:
Aldo Filippelli - VP of Sales & Business Development
aldo@internationalaudioholding.com



The 2024 AXPONA Show

JONATHAN VALIN, ROBERT HARLEY, ANDRE JENNINGS, AND ANDREW QUINT REPORT FROM NORTH AMERICA'S PREMIER HI-FI SHOW!

THIS YEAR'S AXPONA, held in Schaumburg just outside Chicago in early April, was as vibrant and upbeat as any I've attended. It had all the makings of a great show: fabulous venue, lots of exhibit rooms (more than 200), the presence of many European company founders and executives who don't normally attend U.S. regional shows, excellent sound, lots of affordable products (some of them making terrific music), and superb organization by JD Events.

But what really made this AXPONA special was the sheer number of attendees (10,000+, up 14% from 2023), their demographic, and their enthusiasm. I saw more young people, couples, and women than at any other North American show. Moreover, my impression was that they were enthusiastically looking for new and better ways to enjoy music. This is what a hi-fi show should be.

So, sit back and enjoy our 16-page coverage of the greatest new gear at this year's AXPONA show. **—Robert Harley**

Paradigm®

Celebrating Four Decades of Excellence: Founder & XR Series in New Finishes

In a triumphant tribute to four decades of audio innovation, Paradigm proudly presents the Founder Series loudspeakers and XR Series subwoofers in captivating new special anniversay finishes. These exquisite additions mark a profound milestone, seamlessly blending the past and future. Unveiling frozen matte finishes across the iconic series, Paradigm continues to redefine audio excellence.

At the core of this milestone lie three exquisite finishes that captivate the senses: "Ruby Frostbite" and "Azure Ice" envelop the senses in a tranquil embrace, evoking the calmness of a clear winter sky. Lastly, "Frozen Charcoal" captivates with its alluring depth, showcasing shades of grey that mirror the complexity of sound itself.

This new collection of finishes reflects Paradigm's commitment to reshaping listening experiences, blending meticulous craftsmanship and cutting-edge technology to define the future of audio. Explore this iconic collection today.

New! Special Anniversary Finishes

Ruby Frostbite

Frozen Charcoal

Azure Ice

Scan to learn more about XR Series

MADE IN CANADA

Designed, engineered, and fully Made in Canada, by people who love great audio *(just like you).*

Scan to learn more about Founder Series

JONATHAN VALIN ON LOUDSPEAKERS $40,000 AND UP

ANOTHER OPENING, ANOTHER SHOW. In this case, a big opening (more than 200 rooms), with big crowds (claimed to be over 10,000 in number), and, in keeping with last year's trend, with European and Asian manufacturers who never used to show up at regional U.S. events showing up in droves. As the years go by, Chicago's AXPONA is getting to be more and more like a second Munich High End. Shame that it shares such iffy sonics with the German venue.

While the rooms in Schaumburg's Renaissance Hotel and Convention Center aren't nearly as challenging as the glassed-in, partition-walled cubicles of Munich's MOC, they have their peculiarities. What I last year called a tendency toward "megaphonic midranges" was back in abundance, regardless of room size or location. Otherwise outstanding speakers fell victim to an upper-midrange peak that often made them sound bright, sibilant, and sizzly, especially on fortes. (This wasn't helped by the extremely high levels that systems were being demoed at.) If there is a sonic non-starter for a stereo system, it is just this kind of upper-midband peak on vocals and instrumentals. Of course, the other non-starter for a loudspeaker system—midbass boominess—also reared its ugly head on occasions, though more often than not this was a room and playback-level issue rather than a transducer one.

Anomalies aside, AXPONA was still a good sounding show. Good sounding, I say, but seldom realistic sounding. I could count the number of demos that were lifelike enough to startle and delight me on one hand, without using up all my fingers. That magical gestalt shift from enjoyable stereo playback to a near-visible illusion of real singers and musicians performing in front of you just wasn't happening in Schaumburg—nor even (and this was a bit of a surprise) with certain speakers that had managed to pull the trick off last year. This was an "as you like it" show, *par excellence*—pleasantly and sometimes thrillingly "musical" but seldom approaching anything like the sound absolute.

Oh, well. It's a trade show, after all, and there are definite limits to what you can expect from a hi-fi in a cramped hotel room (or a gigantic ballroom), wherein the dealers have had a mere day to unpack, set up their wares, and battle with venue, electricity, and internet.

Here, then, are the high-priced speakers I listened to, starting with the big (sometimes huge) rooms on the first floor of the Convention Center, moving to the 16th floor of the hotel and descending back down to the 3rd floor. It should go without saying that I missed some folks, but as I've always said, I'm just one guy with a briefcase full of blues, classical, and jazz. My sincere apologies in advance to those manufacturers I overlooked—and for any mistakes I may make in nomenclature or pricing.

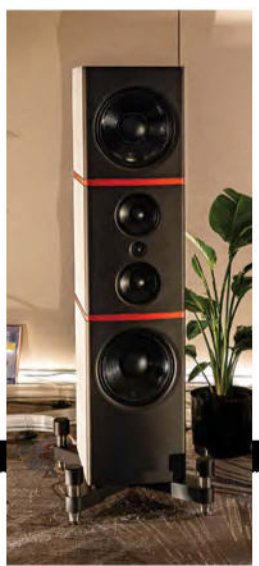
Estelon Forza.

Wilson Audio Specialties Sasha V.

On the convention floor, in Schaumburg D, **Estelon** was showing its gorgeous, $170k, hourglass-shaped, three-way, five-driver, sealed-box **Forzas**, driven by **Vitus Signature Series SM-103 Mk.II** monoblock amps and **SL-103** preamp wired with **Crystal Cable Art Series** interconnects, power cords, and speaker cables. With the Vitus amps in "classic" Class A mode, the Estelons had *very* good low end—rich, detailed, deep, and defined. As was often the case in Schaumburg, the upper midrange was a little bright, forward, and aggressive on a cover of "Goodbye, Yellow Brick Road" and Billie Eilish's "What Was I Made For" (though the lower midrange was dark, solid, beautiful, and artifact-free). The treble was sweet and extended, detailed without heat or aggressiveness. Despite the occasional upper-midrange glimmer, this was the best I've heard the Forzas sound. I returned to this room for a second listen on the last day of the show, and the mids proved to be more relaxed than on Day One. Indeed, on Day Three, the Estelons were one of the few box speakers that sounded lifelike on voice.

In the Perfection Room on the Convention Center floor, **Wilson Audio Specialties** was showing its handsome, three-way, three-driver, $52k **Sasha V**, driven by a **Moon by Simaudio** amp and preamp, sourced by a Moon streaming DAC and a **Clearaudio Signature** turntable with **Hana Unami Blue** cartridge, and wired with **Kubala-Sosna** cable. The Sashas had a warm, plush, romantic sound on vinyl, losing a bit of body and beauty on digital. Bass was a little curtailed in extension; the midrange detailed and forward; the treble a mite soft.

Stenheim Ultime Two SX.



In Schaumburg F, **Stenheim** was showing its three-way, five-driver **Reference Ultime Two SX** D'Appolito floorstander (the SX refers to optional new aluminum-billet platforms with user-adjustable spikes), driven by a quartet of **VTL** monoblocks. The sound was impressive despite the size of the room, which was inducing a bit of sibilance and brightness and a touch of slap echo in the upper mids. Still and all, this was a gorgeous-sounding system with superb staging and imaging and solid, hard-hitting bass.

DESIGNED & MANUFACTURED
IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

FYNE
AUDIO

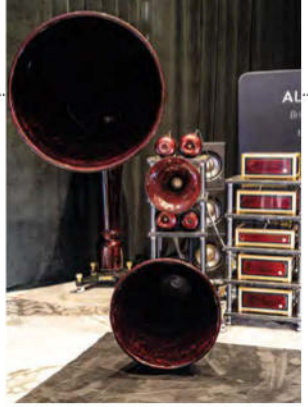
MASTERS OF POINT-SOURCE TECHNOLOGY

CONTINUING WHERE TRADITION LEFT OFF.

Fyne Audio builds on a long tradition of British point-source design, and perfects it for the high-res era. From the pinpoint precision of IsoFlare drivers to the 360-degree immersion of BassTrax ports, Fyne's speakers use patented technology and modern materials to offer high-fidelity sound in both contemporary and heritage styles.

FYNEAUDIO.COM

DISTRIBUTED IN THE UNITED STATES BY HARMONIA DISTRIBUTION | HARMONIADISTRIBUTION.COM | 909.931.0219



ESD Acoustics Super Dragon.

Acora SRB-Gem.

In Schaumburg H, the Chinese company **ESD Acoustics** demoed its huge, $4 million (yes, you are reading that right), six-way, 10-compression-driver (with field-coil power supplies and foiled-beryllium and titanium-sandwich diaphragms), multiple carbon-fiber-spherical-horn **Super Dragon** system, driven by a dozen or so **Auralic** amps. Despite what my colleagues may say (two of them ran from the room with their panties on fire, as the speakers *were*, admittedly, being played a tad too loudly), I thought the Super Dragon sounded rather wonderful, without a trace of horn artifacts. Despite a slight aural disconnect in the low bass, which didn't have quite the electricity, focus, directionality, sparkle, and definition of the midbass, mids, and treble, this was a superb system. If power, color, and thrills galore are what you're looking for (and you have four million dollars burning a hole in your Kitons), this is the speaker for you. I could live with it, even though it doesn't come with an *Absolute Sound* Seal of Approval.

In the Journey/Creation room, Scott Walker and Ted Denney were showing gorgeous, $89k, three-driver, three-way, hourglass-shaped **Estelon X Diamond Mk II**s, driven by France's sterling **JMF Audio** electronics, wired and treated with (what else?) **Synergistic Research** cable and room-tunes, and sourced by Ted's new server. These excellent speakers sounded great on several Qobuz streams, with sensational upper-bass detail and transient response, a freed-up midrange, a lovely treble, and an open (rather than boxy-sounding) presentation. Despite some deep-bass limitations, this was a superior sound—not realistic (nothing was) but extremely musical and listenable.

In the Epiphany room, **Aries Cerat** was showing its $150k **Aurora**—a weird cubical transducer that looks like something that the Borg might've invented. Its compression-driver midrange is loaded into a swirl-like horn; its ribbon tweeter is also horn-loaded via a waveguide; its four woofers approximate a folded open-baffle design (thus the cubical shape). The Aurora comes with a Bluetooth adjustable crossover that can be tailored to the room by the user. Though it is a very high-tech loudspeaker, in Chicago the Aurora's sound was rather murky, as if it were playing through a pleasant early morning haze.

In the Euphoria room, **Acora** was showing a special edition of its two-way SRB, the **SRB-Gem** in a gemstone enclosure. The speaker is $30k all by itself; with the **MR** sub (also in a gemstone cabinet), it is $55k for the pair. In Chicago the Gems were driven by **VAC** electronics. Via a streaming source, the SRB-Gem/MR was quite lovely on choral and soprano voice—boxless and powerful with a two-way's typical open presentation. Indeed, this was the best I've heard any Acora sound (and, for once at AXPONA, the presentation was lifelike).

In the same room, Val was also showing his big $218,000 Acora **VRC** three-ways, also driven by **VAC**, and sourced by **UHA Ultima Apollo** tape deck and a $300k **SAT** turntable/tonearm. When I heard this system on Day One, the VRC was having a problem in the bass—a room node. Despite this, it sounded excellent in the midrange and treble on tape, with lovely color and an extremely wide soundstage. Though the SAT table was not as rich and full in timbre as the tape player, it did generate a deep soundstage, though it suffered from the same lump in the midbass and added a touch of brightness in the treble. (On Day Three, the SAT sounded much better on an Eric Bibb LP—the lump in the bass was reduced, and the overall sound was considerably fuller and more appealing).

In Utopia B, **Focal** showed its $140k, quasi-D'Appolito, four-way, five-driver (with 16-inch field-coil woofer) **Grande Utopia Evo** driven by 740W **Naim Statement** amps. On female voice, the huge Focals sounded a bit boxy and veiled compared to the little Acoras, though ambience recovery was outstanding. On baritone voice, the Utopias were excellent.

In Utopia C, Wynn Wong was driving the three-way, five-driver, $40k **Vimberg Mino** floorstander with **Karan Acoustics** electronics, sourced by a **Thiele TT-01** turntable and a **Kalista DreamPlay DAC**. With the Thiele turntable, the sound was warm, sweet, dark,

Left to right: Estelon X Diamond Mk II, Focal Grande Utopia Evo, Vimberg Mino.

rose
The future of integrated amplifiers are here:
Meet the all-new RA280.
VU METER
BYPASS
ON
PRE AMPLIFIER
MIN
MAX
BASS / dB
TREBLE / dB
LEFT
RIGHT
MoFi
MOFI
DISTRIBUTION
For more info visit HiFiRoseUSA.com
Distributed in the U.S.A. & Canada by MoFi Distribution
info@mofi.com | 312.738.5025 | mofidistribution.com

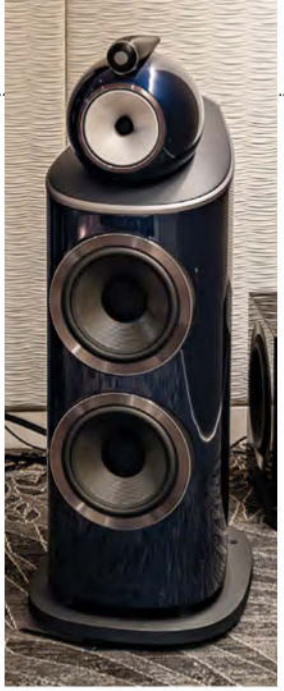
and detailed. Though the smallish speakers were somewhat limited in deep bass, what was there was good. On revisiting the room, I played my Eric Bibb LP on the Thiele table, having just heard it played back on the SAT table in Val Cora's room. Though it was not as rich and romantic as the SAT/Acora presentation, the Thiele/Vimberg combo was more realistic on voice and guitar—one of the tiny few lifelike sounds at the show on LP.

In Utopia D, I listened to the $50k, three-way, five-driver, D'Appolito **Dynaudio Confidence 60** floorstander driven by **Octave** tubes. Though rich in color and impressive in dynamic weight on a jazz piano quartet recording, the Dynaudio was also rather thick sounding, lacking definition and spark.

Jeff Joseph of **Joseph Audio** was showing his $52k three-way **Pearl Graphene Ultra** driven by **Doshi** tubes and sourced by a **J.Sikora** turntable. Rickie Lee was a little bright and piercing on fortes where I was sitting in the front row, but instrumental color was otherwise attractive, and the bass was well controlled and powerful. Jon Batiste's "The Very Thought of You" sounded wonderful minus that bit of upper-midrange aggressiveness on fortes.

The big $180k **Clarisys Auditorium** full-range ribbons were being driven by triode tubes. Transparency to sources was superb, without any leaning down of timbre. For instance, the separation among Bill Evans, Scot LaFaro, and Paul Motian on *Sunday at the Village Vanguard* was astounding. Indeed, LaFaro's articulation on bass was the best I've heard on this album. Alas, for all its splendid transparency, the Auditoriums were not generating much dimensionality or soundstage depth: Images were flat and pinned to the screens. In short, the Auditoriums weren't as impressive as the smaller Minuets and Studios I heard last year.

Driven by an **EMM Labs** amp, the $200k **Credo Audio Switzerland Cinema LTM** multicone line-array transducer with side-firing woofers was extremely lovely sounding on LP—soft gentle treble, glorious midrange, and deep though softish bass.



B&W 801 D4 Signature.

Wilson Audio Specialties' $157k multi-way **Alexx V** made a fine impression driven by **D'Agostino** electronics. With its dark, dynamic, opulent cones-in-a-box presentation, it sounded rather the way a diamond necklace in a velvet case looks—gorgeous jewelry for the ear. Delightful on Bjorn Berge slide guitar and vocal with exceptionally high resolution of finger and string sound and considerable instrumental body, the Alexx V may not have been realistic, but it sure was great hi-fi.

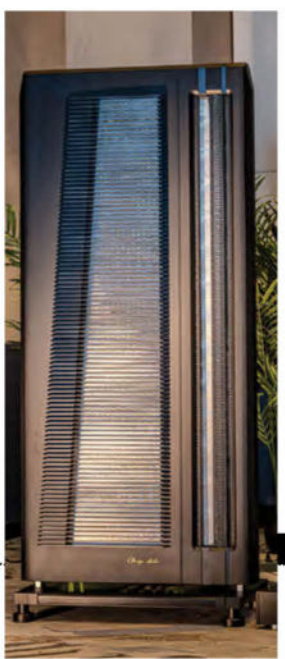
Ditto for the $140k, five-driver, four-way **Sonus faber Aida MkII** driven by **Boulder**, which was absolutely lovely sounding on a cover of "Dancing in the Dark." It may not have been quite as swooningly beautiful as the Wilson Alexx V (the Sonus bass was a little thick), but it was still great hi-fi.

A little more open and less gemütlichkeit than Wilsons or Sonuses, the multi-way $50k **B&W 801 D4 Signatures**, driven by **Classé**, were also more hi-fi than realistic.

Rutherford Audio $165k **Stratton Elypsis 1512**, driven by **Acoustic Arts** monoblocks, was an odd-looking rectangular multi-way with a surprisingly open, nonboxy sound. Lightish in balance with a slightly blowsy lower midrange, it was not particularly lifelike but still pleasant to listen to.

We now travel to the 16th floor of the Renaissance hotel, where my first listen was the four-way, six-driver, $250k **Gauder Akustik DARC 250** driven by **Soulution 7 Series** electronics and sourced by a **Transrotor** turntable with **DS Audio Grand Master EX** cartridge. I was looking forward to hearing the DARC 250s, as the DARC 200s were one of my favorites at last year's AXPONA (plus I'd heard the 250s sound swell in my pal Andre Jennings' system

Left to right: Dynaudio Confidence 60, Joseph Audio Pearl Graphene Ultra, Clarisys Auditorium, Rutherford Audio Stratton Elypsis 1512.



The Gryphon Diablo 333

Perfection, Redefined

THE GRYPHON

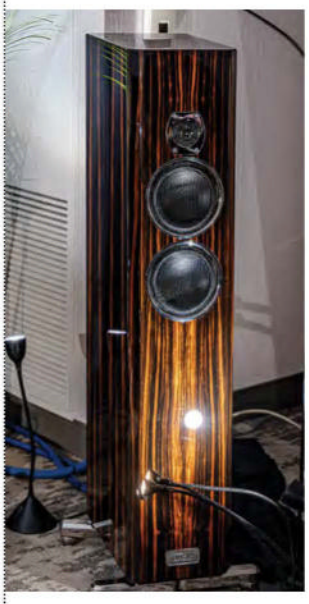
www.gryphon-audio.com

when he reviewed them). Though quite respectably musical, the 250s were a little too dark and sibilant in the hotel room. Timbre on voice and guitar was quite lovely on Jeff Buckley's "Hallelujah," with solid, slightly forward imaging on voice, but realistic sounding it was not (which I know the DARC 250 is capable of, having heard it sound lifelike *chez* Andre).

Avantgarde Acoustic introduced its four-driver, three-way $119k **Mezzo G3** driven by **Phasemation** tubes. (The Mezzo G3 incorporates two, powered, front-horn-loaded, 12-inch woofers, along with twin spherical mid and treble horns.) On streaming, the Mezzo was quite impressive (this was a good show for horns in general, perhaps because their directionality reduced the room reflections that cause wide-dispersion box speakers to sound bright). The Mezzo had gorgeous timbre and presence and fine performance detail on solo acoustic guitar and on voice, guitar, bass, and drum kit. The speaker's low end was solid and deep reaching, making it sound terrific on electronica. A contender!

Gauder Akustik DARC 250.

Avantgarde Acoustic Mezzo G3.



Tidal Piano G3.

Perfect8 Technologies Cube T.

MBL 101 D MKII.

YG Acoustics Sonja 3.2.

On the 15th floor, I got to hear one of my perennial favorites, the $91k **MBL 101 MKII** omnidirectional loudspeakers, driven by **MBL 9011** mono amps and sourced by the **MBL C41** streaming DAC driving the amps directly. Given the nightmare difficulties he faced, the fact that Jeremy Bryan managed to put on a show at all is a story in itself, but that he did so well at it is a wonderment. This was the best system I'd heard at that point in time—the first 3-D soundfield without the forwardness and upper midrange edge that was almost everywhere else. Airy, spacious, open, fast, beautiful, and eerily three-dimensional sounding, this was another contender.

Zellaton showed its $45k **Emotion Evo** driven by **Grimm** electronics. While open and non-boxy sounding, the Emotions were also bright on tenor voice and tenor sax. The small room was not doing them any favors.

The three-way, four-driver $99k **YG Acoustics Sonja 3.2** were being driven by **Linn Klimax Solo 800** amps and sourced by a **Linn Klimax DSM**. Like the Zellatons, the speakers produced a freed-up sound without boxiness. Timbre was a little lean but detailed with outstanding attack and sustain on acoustic guitar strings. I heard a touch of sibilance on voice, but tone color and focus were otherwise excellent.

Perfect8 Technologies $60k **Cube T** quasi-omnidirectional floorstanders driven by **Ypsilon** electronics were boxlessly open on a cover of The Eagles' "Desperado" and very very good on female vocals. "This is a contender," I wrote in my notes. An Oscar Peterson album sounded superb in the midrange and upper octaves, despite a little room muddle at the bottom on Ray Brown's bass. Detailed and open with a wide soundstage, the Cube T was rather like a stat with greater image solidity.

The $64k **Tidal Piano G3** driven by Tidal electronics sounded focused but rather miniaturized on *Belafonte at Carnegie Hall*. A little dark in balance, with impressive inner detail, lovely timbre, and no edge in the upper mids, it was good but not exceptional.

On the 14th floor, **Audio Note** was showing its $65k field-coil **AN-E/SPx** driven by AN amps, preamp, and player. Playing very loud from corner locations, it was room filling, a little aggressive

FONO ACUSTICA

Thiele

Kalista
ART OF MUSIC

DreamPlay X
MANTAX

Distributed in USA & Canada by

WYNN AUDIO

20 Wertheim Crt, Unit 31 | www.wynnaudio.com

Canada: +1 (647) 995-2995

USA: +1 (212) 826-1111

JV'S BEST OF SHOW

A 10-way tie among the **Estelon Forza**, the **Stenheim Ultime 2**, the **Acora SRB-Gem**, the **ESD Super Dragon**, the **Avantgarde Mezzo G3**, the **MBL 101-E MKII**, the **Vimberg Mino**, the **Triangle Art Metis**, the **Perfect8 Cube T**, and the **Wilson Alexx V**.

YG Acoustics Hailey 3.

Gryphon EOS.

in the midrange, but superb on drum and synth. Too loud for my taste but tasty if you were a headbanger.

YG Acoustics demoed its $64k **Hailey 3** driven by **Vinnie Rossi** electronics. The Hailey was transparent and detailed in the midrange and treble, but insufficient in the bass.

The $54k, three-way, four-driver **Gryphon EOS 5** driven and sourced by Gryphon electronics was finely focused on both female mezzo and orchestral accompaniment. Timbre was dark and rich. This was a lovely sound, despite a little aggressiveness on fortes. On Zander Zon's pedal bass, the Gryphon produced an astonishing semblance of strings and performer articulation.

On the 12th floor, **TAD** demoed its $65k **GE1** three-way, four-driver, bass-reflex floorstander, driven by a TAD amp and sourced by a TAD player. Transient response was a bit subdued, making for a soft, smooth, laidback balance that was quite listenable.

PMC showed its $90k three-way, six-driver **Fenestria**, driven and sourced by **Esoteric** electronics. As with the TAD, the Fenestria's smooth, extended, laidback response made for a relaxed presentation with good depth and timbre. Bass was a little nondescript on *The Pink Panther* theme. Overall, the PMC was not great but not bad.

On the 7th floor, **Bayz** showed its $160k **Counterpoint 2.0** omni loudspeaker driven by **Chord** electronics. Though the room was a little small for a large speaker that was being played loud, I could still hear the omni virtues in soundstage, dimensionality, and ambience. A good showing for a transducer that has not always shown well.

Clarisys' $46k **Minuet** full-range ribbon loudspeaker was driven and sourced by **VAC** and **Belleson**. As with the large Clarisys Auditorium, the Minuet was not generating much stage depth or width of image in a small narrow room.

On the 6th floor, **Linn** showed its $66k **360** floorstander with active bass driven by Linn electronics and sources. The sound was lean and pacey, like that of all Linn gear.

The mid-sized $66k **Clarisys Studio** ribbon speaker was being driven by **Hegel** electronics in yet another small, narrow room. The sound was better than that in the other Clarisys rooms, though I was sitting too close, and the amplification was a bit dry and lean. Nonetheless, the Studio had moderately good depth, high resolution, decent body, and excellent ambience retrieval.

Goldmund showed its $95k **Asteria** wireless speaker. Tonal balance was ferociously neutral, making for a highly detailed, slightly clinical sound.

Triangle Art's $60k **Metis** horn-loaded floorstander had a sound that was simultaneously bright, rich, dense, and suave—and solid as hell. I liked the Metis in spite of the occasional brightness because of its uniquely continuous staging, solid almost mono-like imaging, and great midbass. A peculiar contender.

On the 4th floor, the $57k **Tidal Piano** driven by **Zesto** was, alas, not very good. Its thinner tone and restricted bass spotlighted the upper mids, making strings and winds rather piercing on fortes.

On the 3rd floor, **Orchestalls** $250k five-way **Le Clavier** individually suspended and articulated multi-enclosure loudspeaker was driven by an **Ella** Class D amplifier. Quite neutral in balance and surprisingly coherent, clear, and full range given its many moving parts, the Clavier sounded a bit like a planar, even when it was being played too loudly.

Left to right: TAD GE1, Orchestalls Le Clavier, Bayz Counterpoint 2.0.

LEIF 3
BRING NEW LEIF
TO YOUR SYSTEM
NÖRDOST
PURPLE FLARE 3
BLUE HEAVEN 3
NÖRDOST
LEARN MORE
www.nordost.com

ROBERT HARLEY ON ELECTRONICS

Soulution 3 Series electronics.

THIS YEAR'S AXPONA broke all records for attendance, number of exhibitors, and diversity of attendees. The official attendance figure was 10,391, a 14% increase over the previous year. Showgoers came from 42 states and 31 countries to see and hear 202 exhibit rooms at the Schaumburg Renaissance hotel. The vibe among exhibitors and attendees was upbeat and vibrant.

AXPONA has become an important venue for introducing new products, even though the show takes place less than a month before the Munich show. This year was no exception in the electronics category, with several important debuts of preamplifiers, power amplifiers, integrated amps, and phonostages. Let's dive in.

Five Most Significant Introductions

Soulution 3 Series Electronics

The Swiss company known for their innovative and terrific-sounding electronics has brought its technology and aesthetic to all-new versions of their entry-level 3 Series (entry-level for **Soulution**). There are five products in the range, the **331 integrated amplifier**, **326 preamplifier**, **312 stereo amplifier**, **350 phonostage**, and **360 DAC**. The preamp and integrated amp accept optional phono and DAC boards, and the phonostage accepts only the output from moving-coil cartridges.

The new series benefits from trickle-down technology from the company's vaunted 5 Series and 7 Series, along with recent advances made to those lines (see Jonathan Valin's review of the 727 preamplifier in Issue 345). In fact, the new 3 Series looks, on paper, to significantly outperform its predecessors. The 312 amplifier ($28,975) and 331 integrated amplifier ($32,975) have much greater power reserves, thanks in large part to their four newly designed switch-mode power supplies. Equipped with a whopping 160,000µf of filter capacitance, the supplies can deliver 4200VA of peak power for five seconds. This translates to 120Wpc into 8 ohms, 240Wpc into 4 ohms, and 480Wpc into 2 ohms. This ability to double the output power as the impedance is halved is a hallmark of an amplifier that can drive difficult loads with ease and maintain its dynamic impact, as well as sound like a more powerful amplifier than its 8-ohm rating suggests. In addition, the output stage is heavily biased into Class A operation. The input and driver stages have a bandwidth of 2MHz to reduce phase shifts in the audioband.

The 326 preamp ($21,475) offers two XLR inputs and two RCA inputs and can accept optional phono and DAC boards ($4275 and $7225, respectively). It also features wideband circuitry (>2MHz). The 331 integrated amplifier combines the circuitry of the 326 preamp and 312 power amplifier in one chassis. A 331 integrated amp fully loaded with the DAC and phono boards can serve as a complete one-chassis system—just add speakers.

The 350 phonostage ($21,975) offers a fixed gain of 60dB, a figure that increases to 66dB from the balanced outputs. The circuitry features 2MHz bandwidth with very low noise. Finally, the 360 DAC ($24,975) offers four digital inputs (SPDIF, AES/EBU, USB, Network). All incoming signals are upsampled by DSP to the DXD format (384kHz/32-bit) and converted to analog with two mono DACs per channel. The DAC chip's integral digital filtering is bypassed in favor of custom filtering. Volume control is realized with the innovative LEEDH system, which provides digital-domain attenuation without a sonic penalty. I've evaluated LEEDH (in another product) and found it to be transparent—a first for a digital-domain volume control. Watch for our review of the Soulution 3 Series components in an upcoming issue.

Vandersteen L5-ACC linestage preamplifier.

Vandersteen L5-ACC Linestage Preamplifier

A preamplifier from **Vandersteen**? After 47 years building loudspeakers, why would Vandersteen make a preamplifier? The answer is that this is the preamp that Richard Vandersteen wants for his own system but isn't available on the market. So, he created a preamp with several unique features and thought other listeners would want those features as well. The result is the **L5-ACC**, with "ACC" an initialism for "Audio Control Center." The L5-ACC offers features not normally found on a preamp—features that are implemented in a novel way.

First are the bass and treble controls, realized not by switching in an equalization circuit but by using relays to add circuitry in parallel to the signal path. The result is tone controls with no sonic penalty. Sensibly, the controls have limited range—just enough to nudge a system or a particular recording in the right tonal direction. The bass control offers boost of +2dB, +4dB, +6dB, and cut of –3dB, and the treble control offers +1dB, +2dB, –1dB and

Audio that inspires.

revelation series | **Pictor** | preamplifier **Taurus** | power amp

constellation

www.constellationaudio.com

Chord Electronics Ultima integrated amplifier.

–2dB adjustment, all in discrete steps rather than being continuously variable as with most tone controls. Any combination of settings can be stored in one of three presets, accessible on the remote control. The presets are handy for creating your own loudness-compensation circuit for low-level listening or adding a bit of bass boost to some older records, for examples.

A feature not found on modern preamps, but that Vandersteen thought useful, is a mono-blend circuit to reduce the "ping-pong" mixes prevalent in the early days of stereo recording—drums 100% in the right channel and the lead instrument 100% in the left channel, for example The mono-blend circuit reduces that exaggerated stereo effect and is selectable on the L5-ACC remote control in four steps including full mono. Finally, the L5-ACC incorporates a matrix that takes out-of-phase information from each channel, inverts it, and mixes it back in on the theory that this out-of-phase information restores the natural ambience encoded in the recordings. It's like the "Hafler Hookup" popular in the 1970s but without rear speakers. The L5-ACC will begin shipping in Q4 this year with a price of $15,000. Vandersteen created a great-sounding room with the L5-ACC, **Audio Research** electronics, **AudioQuest** cables and power conditioning, and his own excellent **Kento Carbon** loudspeakers. Come to think of it, I've never heard bad sound in a Vandersteen show demo.

Balanced Audio Technology VK-85 Preamplifier and REX 300 Power Amplifier

Balanced Audio Technology (BAT), the company that made its name with tube electronics, introduced two new solid-state products at this AXPONA. As befitting the company's name and design philosophy, the two products are fully balanced designs.

The **VK-85** preamp ($12,500) incorporates improved versions of many of BAT's established technologies including the "Super-Pak Quattro" power supply, "Shunt Volume Control," and "Uni-Stage Design." This latter term describes the VK-85's circuit topology that uses only a single gain stage. Preamplifiers typically have an input buffer, gain stage, and output buffer. The VK-85 also features no feedback, no coupling capacitors, and a transformer-buffered output. The output transformer is an all-new premium design. Also, only N-channel MOSFETs are used, rather than the typical N-channel and P-channel pairs. The innovative volume control imposes only a single Vishay bulk-foil resistor in the signal path, providing 140 steps of 0.5dB each.

The **REX 300** ($15k) is essentially the flagship REX 500 amplifier with a smaller output stage and power supply for those who don't need the REX's whopping 1000W of power (4 ohms). Rated at 200Wpc in the stereo version, the REX 300 features the same split-power-supply topology as its big brother. The fully balanced circuit has only two gain stages with no global feedback. Like the VK-85 and REX 500, the 300 is based on N-channel MOSFETs. The amplifier can double its power into 4 ohms and can be configured as a monoblock. You can start with a stereo unit and if you want more power later, buy a second REX 300, and send your first one back to the factory to have it converted to mono operation. BAT showed the interiors of the products, which appear to have exceptional build-quality.

Chord Electronics Ultima Integrated Amplifier

England's **Chord Electronics** were featured in three rooms this year, with the new **Ultima** integrated amplifier making its debut in the room of U.S. distributor **Sound Organisation**. The first new integrated amplifier from Chord in seven years, the Ultima is a serious piece of engineering and industrial design. The 125Wpc Ultima features Chord's dual-feed-forward error-correction technology along with the kind of robust power supply for which the company is famous. The build-quality is outstanding, with a chassis machined from solid aluminum billet, a 28mm-thick front panel, and a round power button dominating the front panel's center that illuminates in different colors to show the input selected. The two other knobs, for volume and balance, are also illuminated. The whole effect is stunning. The Ultima will be priced at $11,250 when it begins shipping in September.

Cambridge Audio CXA-81 Mk.II Integrated Amplifier

Cambridge Audio has updated its wildly popular **CXA-81** integrated with a new ESS DAC and upgraded components. The redesign to **Mk.II** status was inspired by the new ESS ES9018K2M Sabre32 DAC, a chip that offers excellent technical performance. Cambridge has married this new DAC to the classic combination of Class AB amplification and a large power supply featuring an oversized toroidal transformer. The unit outputs 80Wpc and is said to be able to drive low-impedance speakers. Connectivity includes Bluetooth aptX HD, coaxial, TosLink, and USB digital inputs along with balanced and unbalanced analog inputs. Other features include headphone and subwoofer outputs along with a

Balanced Audio Technology VK-85 preamplifier.

Balanced Audio Technology REX 300 power amplifier.

LUMIN

U2

NETWORK MUSIC TRANSPORT

LINEAR POWER SUPPLY | DIRECT-COUPLED USB OUTPUT | ALL-NEW PROCESSOR | OPTICAL FIBRE NETWORK | DSD512 PCM768

L2

MUSIC LIBRARY & NETWORK SWITCH

ZERO CONFIG REQUIRED | TRANSFER OVER USB OR NETWORK | DUAL DRIVE CAPACITY | 4-PORT AUDIOPHILE GRADE SWITCH | 2x SFP FIBRE 2x RJ45 COPPER

EFFORTLESS STREAMING, EXCEPTIONAL SOUND

WWW.LUMINMUSIC.COM

T+A R 2500 R Multi Source Receiver.

preamp-out pair for driving an outboard power amplifier. The Roon Tested CXA-81 Mk.II is a natural partner for the company's recently introduced CXN network player and CXC disc transport. The unit begins shipping in May with a U.S. retail price of $1199.

Auspicious Debuts

Goldmund's new **Telos 800** stereo amplifier is the new entry into Goldmund's amplifier line, delivering 300Wpc into 8 ohms and featuring a low noise floor and robust power reserves. The 126-pound amplifier features a 3200VA transformer. The company is short on specifics but watch for a review soon. Price: $89,000.

Goldmund also debuted the **Telos 690** integrated amplifier. The Swiss company, founded in 1978, married extensive digital and analog connectivity with a robust 250Wpc (320Wpc into 4 ohms) power-amplifier section. Five unbalanced analog inputs are provided along with TosLink, SPDIF, and USB digital inputs. Price: $35,000.

T+A introduced a compelling all-in-one unit that combines power amplification, full preamp functions, streaming, and even an optional phono input. The **R 2500 R Multi Source Receiver** outputs 140Wpc into 8 ohms, 250Wpc into 4, and is designed and built in Germany. In a departure from some of T+A's more recent integrated products, the R 2500 R features a Class AB output stage that is heavily biased into Class A operation. The power supply is a switch-mode type. Connectivity options abound, including Bluetooth, AirPlay, Internet Radio, HDMI, CD, and FM radio. Available in silver or black, the R 2500 R will sell for $18,880 when it begins shipping in Q2.

Zesto Audio showed its new lower-priced **Andros Spirit** phonostage. Using circuitry from the acclaimed Andros, the Spirit attempts to deliver much of Andros' qualities in a lower-priced product, largely through eschewing the elaborate (and beautiful) chassis work of the company's top items. The Andros Spirit is the first product in the company's more affordable Spirit Series. The all-tube circuitry is built around four 12AX7 tubes. It can be ordered as moving-magnet-only or moving-magnet and moving-coil ($2997 and $3997, respectively). The mc version incorporates a step-up transformer, thus the price differential. Moving-coil cartridge loading can be adjusted on the fly with no clicks or pops. Gain is 48dB (mm) or 64dB (mc). The Andros Spirit was on static display, but the full Andros phonostage was part of a superb-sounding system with the company's **Eros 500** monoblocks and **Tidal Piano** loudspeakers, all wired with **Cardas** cable and on a **Stillpoints** rack. (See Wayne Garcia's review of the Eros 500 in Issue 349.)

Zesto Audio Andros Spirit phonostage.

AGD Productions, the company that makes a switching-amplifier module inside what looks like a vacuum tube, showed the new **AGD Solo** monoblock amp. The company's claim to fame is the use of gallium-nitride switching transistors in place of conventional silicon transistors, which the company says are better suited to a switching output stage. Company founder and designer Alberto Guerra previously worked in semiconductor design, specifically in the development of gallium-nitride transistors. The AGD Solo can deliver a whopping 550W into 4 ohms and has a peak current output of 50A. The products are sold directly to consumers. Price: $23,500 per pair.

The Norwegian company **Electrocompaniet** celebrated its 50th anniversary with a new flagship amplifier, the **AW 800 M Nemo 2**. Rated at 800W into 8 ohms (1500W into 4), the AW 800 Nemo 2 is the most powerful amplifier in the company's history. The amplifier is also available in a stereo version that outputs 300W into 8 ohms and 600W into 4. The stereo amplifier can also operate in bi-amplification mode. As you would expect from these power ratings, the power supply is massive, featuring 210,000µf of filter capacitance and dual toroidal transformers. The amplifier is a complete redesign and upgrade of all circuits of the company's AW 600, the previous flagship. The AW 800 M Nemo 2 sports the traditional Electrocompaniet look that has characterized the company's products for decades. Price: $22,500 each.

AGD Productions Solo monoblock amplifier.

Electrocompaniet AW 800 M Nemo 2.

Best Sound (cost no object)

The sound in the **Wynn Audio** room was superb, with the modest-sized **Vimberg Mino** loudspeaker doing an amazing job filling the large space of one of the giant downstairs rooms. The system was driven by **Karan Acoustics** amplification, with a **Thiele TT-01** turntable (set up by Mr. Thiele himself) or **Kalista DreamPlay DAC** as the source, with wiring by **Fono Acoustica**.

Stenheim Reference Ultime Two SX loudspeakers on the new Stenheim **Reference Platforms** driven by four **VTL MB-185 III Signature** power amplifiers equipped with EL34 output tubes, **dCS Rossini DAC** and **Rossini Clock** at the front end, connected with **Nordost** cables, Nordost power conditioning, and just about every Nordost accessory and tweak imaginable. The expert set up by **Stirling Trayle** didn't hurt.

Although not inexpensive, they promise to bring the fabulous musical qualities of Soulution electronics to a wider audience.

Best Sound (for the money)

Morel's Avyra floorstander delivered full dynamic range and bass extension in a $2k-per-pair speaker. Everyone in the room was floored by the price-to-performance ratio. The new **MoFi SourcePoint** floorstander at $5k was clearly an overachiever, sounding like it should cost much more. Finally, the **Magnepan MG1.7X** ($5k), a new hot-rodded version of this venerable speaker, had it all over the box speakers in transparency and imaging, driven by a **Luxman** integrated amp in the room of **Glenn Poor's Audio Video**.

Most Significant Product Introduction

Soulution 3 Series of electronics. This new power amp, preamp, integrated amp, phonostage, and DAC look to be significantly upgraded over their already superlative predecessors. Although not inexpensive, they promise to bring the fabulous musical qualities of Soulution electronics to a wider audience.

Most Significant Trend

The explosive growth of AXPONA, along with more women and young people at the show. This was a huge, and hugely successful, show. It bodes well for high-end audio.

Most Coveted Product

Analog Audio Design TP-1000 open-reel tape machine (along with a library of tapes). This newly built machine incorporates features never before seen in a reel-to-reel player, and according to Jonathan Valin, sounds terrific.

ANDRE JENNINGS ON ANALOG AND DIGITAL SOURCES

Thiele TT01 turntable w/ TA01 tonearm.

TOPPING 10,000 ATTENDEES, with 391 to spare, AXPONA had its biggest showing yet. People of all ages came to this year's show in ample numbers from 42 states and 31 countries. The show exhibit had many longstanding products as well as a remarkably high number of newly introduced ones in every category. My beat was source components. Yeah, there is a source component in every room unless the display is static, and even then, there could be one included. So, to offset the inevitable impossibility of one person covering all 202 exhibit rooms, I mostly prioritized newly introduced products. As always with a show this large, I certainly missed some brands but, at this point, it is understood by most readers that there is a physical limit to what can be covered. With that said, let us see what I found.

Analog Audio Design TP-1000.

Most Significant

Kalista Mantax DAC

From the mind of Kalista's Jean-Marie Clauzel comes the **DreamPlay Mantax DAC** ($64,300). While the inputs of this DAC can support multiple digital sources (SPDIF, AES/EBU, TosLink, I²S, and USB), the optimal connection for the Mantax to the DreamPlay X/XC is I²S. The unit comes in two chassis (the DAC and a separate power supply). Inside the DAC are two main PC boards (the D/A output-stage board and the digital-input board). The output board contains a user-selectable ESS DAC or AKM DAC as well as the choice of tube or solid-state output. The display gives full menu access and there is a remote control for from-the-seat selections. Sonically, in a system of **Karan Acoustics** electronics, and **Vimberg** speakers, the DreamPlay Mantax system sounds liquid and refined: arguably one of the most inviting digital playback systems at AXPONA.

Kalista Mantax DAC.

Thiele TT-01 Turntable w/ TA-01 Tonearm and Active suspension platform

Thiele introduced the TT-01 Turntable with TA-01 Tonearm ($28,000) and active suspension platform ($18,000). A platter mat ($230) and damping weight ($1000) rounded out the Thiele offerings. The table has three levels of constrained-layer damping, with the drive motor and controller on the lower level, the armboard/tonearm on the center level, and the platter/bearing on the top level. The bearing uses a ceramic ball with bearing grease designed to give a slight bit of drag for the motor system. The platter is a form of horizontal constrained-layer damping using a subplatter, acrylic disc, and metal outer ring. The TA-01 tonearm mount consists of a center ceramic ball secured to the armboard by four screws in a parallelogram arrangement to form a 5-point mount. The arm itself is a pivoted linear-tracking design that is said to have less than 0.036 degrees of error. The armtube is a double-walled design filled with a gel to provide resonance damping. The operational feel is good as was the sound of this analog system playing music. Finally, there is the active suspension system that monitors vibration and actively cancels it from below as well as any airborne or mechanical vibrations from above. The system is said to have no digital latency/delay since the isolation function is entirely analog. In the same system as the Kalista digital front-end listed above, the Thiele TT/arm combination proved to sound excellent. Look for a review in a future issue of TAS.

Analog Audio Design TP-1000

Pro Sound Ltd. showed the Analog Audio Design TP-1000 tape deck ($27,000, reviewed by JV in this issue). The TP-1000 is a new tape deck built from the ground up that will play back 2-track (½-track) ¼" 7.5ips and 15ips tapes. The unit features a remote control and LCD touchscreen display that allows access to all set-up and configuration options, as well as a headphone output. Operation and playback using the deck is smooth and seem intuitive. Listening to 15ips sample cuts from Horch House (Yello's *Stella*, Hans Theessink, and Monty Alexander) were delightfully entertaining.

TRAPEZE

Reimagined

A new angle on audio perfection

AUDIOVECTOR

UHA Ultima Apollo, Lampizator Poseidon, SAT XD1 w/CF1-09Ti.

Soulution 757 Deemphasis Preamplifier

The Soulution 757 Deemphasis preamplifier ($84,975) was in the playback system in the AXISS Audio room. What is a deemphasis preamplifier? It's a phonostage for moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges that also provides power and equalization for DS Audio optical cartridges. If that weren't enough, the 757 also provides equalization for direct tape head connection from a tape deck. In this system, the 757 was equalizing a DS Audio Grand Master EX cartridge mounted on a Transrotor tonearm and table. The Soulution 727 preamp and 511 mono amps rounded out the electronics that sent the signal to the Gauder Akustik DARC 250 Mk II loudspeakers. The sound produced from my Basie LP was resolved, while RLJ's "We Belong Together" was studded with drive and dynamics. There will be a review in a future issue of TAS.

Bellson Brilliance Phonostage

Bellson introduced its two-input Brilliance phonostage ($8500) that features a Wi-Fi remote-control app where the user selects one of two inputs, cartridge type (mm/mc), loading, and gain. The unit features no coupling capacitors in the signal path and is DC servo-controlled, uses high-bandwidth discrete op-amps and Class A outputs. The sound produced from the demo system of Acoustic Signature, Ortofon, VAC, Clarisys Audio, and Nordost showed promising performance at its price point.

Auspicious Debuts

UHA Ultima Apollo, Lampizator Poseidon, SAT XD1 w/CF1-09Ti

UHA introduced the Apollo tape deck ($55,000) with as much trickle-down technology from the top-tier SuperDeck that could fit into the standard TASCAM BR20 physical chassis the units are based on. The sonic improvements come from changes that encompass a new improved tape playback equalizer and beefed-up supply voltage regulation needed to feed the circuit; the UHA outboard AC-to-DC power unit is required and supplied with the deck.

Like UHA, Lampizator embarked on a similar path of creating a DAC that is one-tier-down from its top-line Horizon with the intent of providing a product that gets as close as possible to its flagship at a more affordable price. The Poseidon ($25,500) has Horizon-like input and remote-switching/volume control features, as well as a new OLED display.

In the same room, SAT displayed its XD1 TT for the first time at a U.S. audio show, along with the CF1-09Ti tonearm ($307,500 TT/arm) holding a Lyra Atlas Lambda cartridge. The table uses a sophisticated Technics motor and controller with many enhancements encased in a substantial yet component-rack-friendly footprint. The table has isolation features via a custom Minus K Technology platform and additional isolation/damping in its trio of support feet.

The sound from all three devices (UHA, SAT, and Lampizator) was in line with expected performance at their high-end price points. They provided the system of VAC electronics and Acora loudspeakers linked by Cardas cables with enjoyable musical sources that certainly filled the highly voluminous exhibit space with good sound. I also had a slightly similar listening experience with the Lampizator Poseidon in the room with Von Schweikert VR55 SE speakers driven by WestminsterLab electronics.

Clearaudio Master Jubilee turntable with 10" Unity tonearm

Clearaudio introduced its Master Jubilee turntable with 10" Unity tonearm ($60,000). The Master Jubilee is a 45th anniversary, lim-

Soulution 757 Deemphasis preamplifier.

Bellson Brilliance phonostage.

Love That Free Upgrade Feeling!

Whether it's before a transatlantic flight or at the hotel after a long and tiresome journey, there's nothing quite like hearing those magic words "Free Upgrade" – unless it's when those same magic words apply to your audio system. The software in a CH component does a lot more than just switch functions. It controls and maintains the optimum operating conditions for the analog circuitry, the network interface for file replay, the processing for and audio performance of the digital conversion. So when the CH Control App tells you to upgrade a unit's firmware, it could be the signal for a significant musical upgrade...

Writing in The Absolute Sound, I1 owner Alan Taffel reviewed the latest Firmware upgrade and concluded:

> *"What I heard was no minor change. In fact, if I hadn't done the upgrade myself, I never would have believed I was listening to the same DAC card in the same I1. This was a completely new DAC with an entirely different—and much better—sound."*
>
> *"CH's DAC firmware upgrade is an unqualified success. Sonically, this new DAC is not only much improved; it goes toe-to-toe with the best DAC I've had in my system. And it cost me nothing!*
> *All this is thanks to CH's forward-thinking, upgrade-minded architecture."*
>
> **Alan Taffel, The Absolute Sound, Issue 349, May/June 2024**

By combining modular hardware with software control, CH Precision is able to offer not just unprecedented musical performance, but performance that actually improves over time, future-proofing not just your system but your investment too.

CH Precision
It's like getting compound interest on your audio gear

For a dealer or distributor near you: www.ch-precision.com/where-to-experience

www.ch-precision.com • info@ch-precision.com

ited edition record spinner in the form of the Reference Jubilee with additional tweaks. With a larger platter and stainless-steel flywheel sitting atop its magnetically levitated bearing and magnetically stabilized Unity tonearm, the Master Jubilee is one eye-catching record player.

Clearaudio Signature turntable w/Signature Carbon Black tonearm

On the more affordable front, Clearaudio's Signature turntable w/Signature Carbon Black tonearm ($4000) made its debut. As an exclusive U.S. market item, the Signature integrates technology from the Concept Signature and the Master Jubilee and is equipped with an external Professional Power 12-volt linear power supply.

In Other News

At this show, we listened to a limited-edition cartridge made from mammoth tusk (the **Aidas Mammoth Gold**, $10,450) mounted to the tonearm on **a J.Sikora 15th Anniversary Standard MAX** turntable ($47,000) feeding a bespoke custom **Doshi Audio EVO** phonostage ($35,995+) and electronics powering **Joseph Audio**'s **new Pearl Graphene Ultra** loudspeakers in a system wired with **Cardas** cables. Playing RLJ's "We Belong Together" produced good dynamics and drive.

Soulution updated its **3 Series** components and showed second-generation versions at this year's AXPONA. Among the ones in my category were the new **350** phonostage ($21,975) and **360** DAC ($24,975). The new line is said to have updated circuitry derived from the 5 and 7 Series electronics.

On the DAC/streamer front, **Ideon** showed its **Absolute Epsilon Meta DAC** with its streamer and clock in a **JMF/Stenheim**-based system. **Cambridge Audio** showed its new **CXN100 Network Player** ($1099) with LCD color display connected to a new integrated amplifier from the same company. A brief listen to some already streaming Daft Punk was promising at that price point. **Grimm** showed a working version of the **MU2** streamer/DAC ($17,500) that was on static display at last year's AXPONA. **Accuphase** showed its refreshed CD/SACD Player/DAC, the **DP-770** ($26,575). **Luxman**'s new **NT-07 Streaming Network Transport** ($7495) made its debut in an all-Luxman system feeding **Magico**

Clearaudio Master Jubilee turntable.

Aidas Mammoth Gold, J.Sikora.

S3 2023 speakers. **Innuos**' **Pulsar** was shown with a prototype I²S output they are developing. The Pulsar's I²S output fed a **Lampizator DAC** with **Soulution** electronics and **Rockport** speakers.

The **AMG** turntable introduced last year gained a wood body (called the **AMG Giro Wood MKII w/9w2** tonearm, $13,500). **Rega** showed its new up-priced **Naia** turntable ($12,995) that takes technology from the bespoke Naiad concept turntable and transfers it to Rega's most ambitious and advanced production model yet. **Metaxas & Sins** displayed the **Tourbillion T-RX** tape deck ($49,000) and its new to the US market **Perambulator** turntable ($29,000) with an all-titanium **Combobulator** tonearm ($8000). **Transrotor** introduced the new **Bellini TMD** turntable ($6495) and 9" **Studio** tonearm ($5595). **Atoll** showed a very affordable dual-mono discrete Class A phonostage (**PH200**, $1600). **Auris** had the new lower-cost belt-drive **Mystik** turntable ($999) on display in the Expo Hall. **Luxman**'s prototype **E-07** phonostage ($TBD) made a showing. **Zesto Audio** had its new **Andros Spirit** phonostage ($2997) on static display. **Brinkmann** showed its new **TraNt** turntable power supply ($3490) connected to the **Taurus** that is said to up performance and get the combo closer to Brinkmann's top-of-the-line **RoNt III** power supply. Finally, **DS Audio** showed the new **E3** ($2750) optical cartridge/equalizer system, DS' lowest-priced entry-point offering yet.

AJ'S BEST OF SHOW

Best Sound (cost no object)
Gauder Akustik DARC 250 Mk II/Soulution/Transrotor in the Axiss Audio room produced resolute sound and **Stenheim Ultime Two SX/VTL/Nordost** in the Nordost room produced dynamic sound in a large space.

Best Sound (for the money)
Clearaudio Signature turntable w/**Signature Carbon Black** tonearm

Most Significant Product Introduction
Soulution 757 Deemphasis Preamplifier

Most Significant Trend
The increased variety of age-based interest in show attendees

Most Coveted Product
Thiele TT-01 turntable with **TA-01 tonearm** and active suspension platform.

Innovation through Technologies | Outstanding Artisanal

aquahifi.com

aqua
acoustic quality

ANDREW QUINT ON LOUDSPEAKERS UNDER $40,000

Partitioning the loudspeakers at AXPONA 2024 into two categories as we did is certainly not meant to imply that the ones costing less than $40,000 are, by definition, all inexpensive. Heavens, no. Rather, it was simply a way for Jonathan Valin and me to equitably divide up the work. Just five years ago, that dividing line was $20,000. Even allowing for increasing manufacturing costs and inflation, the number of what I'll sheepishly call "moderately priced" speakers *has* increased considerably. Happily, there are still plenty of value-priced products and several newly minted examples are noted below.

I've attempted to limit myself to products that are truly new. Many manufacturers will designate a model as "new" if it was presented at another audio show just a few months earlier. Others failed to take advantage of AXPONA's willingness to announce product debuts ahead of time, and I stumbled across more than a few of those purely by accident. I do apologize to the deserving companies with new offerings that I missed, for whatever reason.

Most Significant Introductions

MoFi Electronics SourcePoint 888 ($4999)

A new loudspeaker from Andrew Jones is always noteworthy and his third design for MoFi Electronics is no exception. The SourcePoint 888 is a substantial ported floorstander with three 8" drivers staring at you (thus the model's name), the topmost of which is the concentric variety beloved to Jones, with a soft-dome tweeter mounted within a paper-cone midrange. The two newly designed woofers feature dual opposing neodymium magnets that are configured with a short voice coil positioned a good distance from the magnetic structure, which is said to result in an exceptionally uniform magnetic field and thus a very linear force to move the cone. Each of the 888's drivers gets its own sub-enclosure, augmenting considerably the cabinet's rigidity and reducing unwanted resonances. The loudspeaker's bass performance was extraordinary, with members of the audience egging on Andrew Jones to play notoriously bass-heavy music (Deadmau5, Tool) at *very* enthusiastic levels.

Clarisys Audio Piccolo.

MoFi Electronics SourcePoint 10: The latest Andrew Jones masterpiece.

Acora Acoustics SRB with Bedrock subwoofer: Gemstone version.

Acora Acoustics SRB with Bedrock subwoofer ($38,000 for standard finish; $85,000 for Gemstone version with internal illumination)

The Bedrock subwoofer is designed to serve as a perfectly integrated LF transducer as well as the ideal stand for Acora's SRB bookshelf model, not unlike the original Wilson WATT/Puppy. The reproduction of pipe organ on the Rutter *Requiem* was majestic with no compromise of detail and spatiality higher up in the frequency spectrum. For a considerable upcharge, you can have the combination executed in one of Acora's colorful Gemstone materials with LED illumination within, which makes for a very dramatic effect in a darkened room.

Clarisys Audio Piccolo ($20,000)

Clarisys, the Florida company that builds its full-range magnetic ribbon speakers in Vietnam, has been around for 15 years, but at recent shows it has been receiving more attention for its products inspired by the Apogee ribbons of yore. The petite Piccolo, the manufacturer's smallest model, was about as new as it gets, the

Accuphase

NEW LOWER PRICING, SAME PRECISION & QUALITY.

Seems like the price of everything is going up lately. But not here. We're excited to be rolling out new, inflation-crushing prices in the United States. Visit **accuphase.com,** then head to your nearest Accuphase dealer to experience impeccable quality sound and shop the new pricing that's as much as 25% less.

HEAR IT AT AXPONA | ROOMS 1130 & 1126

AXISS AUDIO

ACCUPHASE | BEAUDIOFUL | FRANCO SERBLIN | GAUDER AKUSTIK | NIHON ONKYO ENGINEERING
REED | SHELTER | SOULUTION | TRANSROTOR | YUKISEIMITSU AUDIO | ZENSATI | AIRTIGHT

Go to **axissaudio.com** to find an Accuphase dealer near you.

prototype heard at the show finished just days before AXPONA commenced. Clarisys speakers, even the big ones, don't have the daunting amplification requirements that Apogees were known for, and the Piccolos were filling a large room with commanding sound, driven by a 120Wpc triode-tube stereo amplifier; I was told that 75Wpc would be plenty. Pop music with a spacy character (Roxy Music's "Avalon," for instance) was atmospheric and the representation of solo piano was highly convincing.

Totem Loon, with "beak."

Børresen C1 ($16,500)

Børresen Acoustics turned some heads at the Florida International Audio Expo (FLAX) in February when it introduced its X1 loudspeaker for $5500 ($6600 with stands), a market segment that the Danish manufacturer isn't usually associated with. Now Børrensen has a more ambitious standmount that's still affordable to most enthusiasts, the C1. Combined with Axxess electronics plus Ansuz cables and power distribution hardware, the total cost of the system presented in the convention center's Serenity ballroom was around $35k in totality—anything but serene. Vocals were exceptionally present and closely recorded drums an explosive dynamic quality that threatened to knock me back a row or two.

VPE Electrodynamics Airfoil ($18,000)

VPE Electrodynamics was founded in 2020 and is based in St. Louis, though its products are built/assembled in Alvo, Nebraska, a town of 115 souls near the Iowa border. The company's designer is Don Bingaman, a retired aerospace engineer. VPE offers two dipole woofers, intended for use with planar loudspeakers such as Magneplanars, and two full-range models, the Airfoil being the newest. It's a 3-and-a-half-way active design, with a pair of Schiit Audio 200-watt Class AB amplifiers for the open-baffle tweeter/midrange section and a Dayton Audio 300W Class D plate amp for the enclosed woofer. The Airfoils are beautifully constructed and impressed with their dynamics, coherence, and imaging playing challenging orchestral material. VPE Electrodynamics products are sold factory direct, but there's a 6-month trial period when the speakers can be returned for a 100% refund, minus shipping.

Børresen C1.

VPE Electrodynamic Airfoil.

Auspicious Debuts

Sadurni Acoustics Spherical Dual ($5000)

George Sadurni was on hand to demo his new "high-efficiency metal-cast" loudspeakers, a far cry, at least visually, from his extravagant all-horn systems. The Spherical Dual is a svelte, vertically oriented transducer with two modest-size drivers but no crossover. As anticipated, the sound was seamless from top to bottom with accurate instrumental colors. Sadurni played the Spherical Duals with a pair of subwoofers, which lent the necessary weight to "Dance of the Tumblers" from *Exotic Dances from the Opera,* the one classical album everyone seems to have.

Macaria by MACO ($6332–$14,180, depending on material)

As nearly as I can tell, MACO stands for Madly Audacious Concepts (though I wouldn't put money on it), and the company claims to have produced the world's first open-baffle granite loudspeaker, featuring two large concentric drivers in a stone frame. Actually, the Macaria is available in six materials (Birch Ply, Ash, Maple, Walnut, Quartz, and Granite), either polished or natural, and a choice of a "grounded" or "floating" base. That's a total of 24 options, and founder/designer Armando Rehyez, allowing that the various versions can sound different from one another, exclaimed to me: "That's one of the beautiful things about these speakers!"

Totem Loon ($1299)

Totem's latest product is diminutive in both dimensions and price but doesn't sound at all like a small speaker. The performance of the ported 2-way, pretty good to begin with, improved to a surprising degree when a solid aluminum "beak" was placed atop each speaker (the cost is $100/pair). The manufacturer says that certain placements of the speaker—near a room boundary, in particular—results in less "energy" exiting the loudspeaker and the "beak" fixes this.

PS Audio FR5 ($3500, $4000 with stands)

PS Audio is launching a new 4-product speaker range designed by the affable Chris Brunhaven, the Aspen Series, and I heard the 2-way FR5 bookshelf model. It features a planar-magnetic tweet-

VITUS AUDIO

FOREVER NOW

vitusaudio.com

er and a 6½" mid/woofer, plus a passive radiator. The ported enclosure is tuned to 35Hz, so good low-frequency extension is achieved at the cost of efficiency—the sensitivity's around 84dB.

Morel Avyra ($2000/pair) and Biggie ($299/each)

The Israeli manufacturer had two new speakers to play, the Avyra 633, a five-driver, 3-way floorstander and the adorable Biggie—which, of course, it is not, measuring 7" x 7" and sporting a 1" tweeter and a 4" "woofer." The latter is pretty clearly a "lifestyle" product; there's a headphone-like handle and *nine* color choices, including a few that sound suspiciously like lipstick shades: Ruby Red, Aqua Frost, Golden Glow, etc.

Qln Reference 9 ($42,000)

Yes, I know it's a little beyond my price category, but Jonathan didn't get to hear it and I did. The Swedish manufacturer's new flagship is a 3-way design with newly developed midrange and bass drivers, plus a textile-dome tweeter with a frequency response that's said to be flat out past 30kHz. At the low end, the -3dB point is 25Hz and, on the basis of a quick listen, the Reference 9 seems ready to play with the big boys, in terms of dynamics, bass power, detail, and spatiality. The fact that it was driven by Vinnie Rossi's Brama integrated didn't hurt.

In Other News

Metaxas & Sins, creator of *objets d'art* that happen to make beautiful music, was introducing a line of electrostatic speakers. There are three models of ascending size, cost, and royalty status—the **Prinz ($25,000),** the **Czar ($35,000)**, and the **Emperor ($40,000).** With all, the varying density of the stator patination results in less "beaming" than experienced with other electrostats.

T+A's new **Criterion** loudspeaker line borrows technology from the Solitaire series above it. The **S 230 ($11,900)** is a transmission-line design with a 60-liter volume ingeniously folded into a modest-sized enclosure.

YG Acoustics continues to systematically revamp speakers originally designed by the company's prior administration. The latest example is the **Carmel 3 ($29,800)**, which benefitted from "trickle-up" technology from YG's Peaks Series products.

The **Vanatoo Transparent One Encore Plus ($650/pair)** is the third iteration of a wireless powered speaker first introduced 12 years ago. There's a new tweeter with a different waveguide than the previous model, multiple physical inputs (in addition to Bluetooth), a subwoofer output, and a full-function remote. Vanatoo CTO Gary Gesellchen estimates that, historically, half of these speakers have ended up as desktop monitors and a fair number have replaced TV soundbars.

Mon Acoustic premiered the **PlatiMon VC Two ($11,000)**, a full-range floorstander designed to both complement the output a PlatiMon VC One ($6000) and to serve as a stand for the smaller

Morel Avyra floorstander with Morel Biggie on top.

Mon Acoustic PlatiMon VC One + VC Two.

speaker. Ball bearings are placed between the bottom of the VC One and the top of the VC Two for purposes of isolation.

The distinguishing design feature of **Endow Audio** loudspeakers is the unique Point Array midrange/tweeter driver configuration. Nine 1.5" midrange drivers are arranged in a ring within a forward-facing hornlike structure in which a 22mm textile-dome tweeter is mounted concentrically at the rear of the chamber. With the **Bravura 7.2 ($4900/pair),** this assembly sits atop a box that has a 7" woofer in front and a 7" passive radiator to the rear. Off-axis performance was exceptional, providing a whole-room listening experience in a typical domestic space.

Kanta Audio specializes in powered desktop speakers and had two new models to present, the **ORA 4 ($399/pair)** and the **REN ($599/pair**. Both have modern Bluetooth connectivity as well as RCA and USB inputs; the REN also has TosLink and—a first for Kanta—HDMI ARC for use with a television. The REN offers several colorful finishes, including the striking Matte Orange playing at the show.

ATC Loudspeakers is building two limited-edition products to observe the manufacturer's 50th year in business. The **SCM20ASL** active loudspeaker **($13,999)** has on-board power provided by two separate A/B MOSFET amplifiers. In honor of the occasion, the speakers have a blue lacquer finish, and the front baffle has hand-upholstered full-grain blue leather. Production is limited to 150 pairs. There's also a matching subwoofer, the **C4 Sub Mk2** limited to just 20 units, at **$9999** each.

Best Sound (cost-no-object)
The Acora/VAC/SAT/Lyra/Aurender/LampizatOr/Cardas room
Yes, again. Sure, there are plenty of other high-performance six-figure loudspeakers out there but when their creators start bringing their best efforts to audio shows, playing them with the finest associated equipment, springing for best room at the show venue, and setting up their system with maniacal care, these competitors will be in the running for this king of the hill designation.

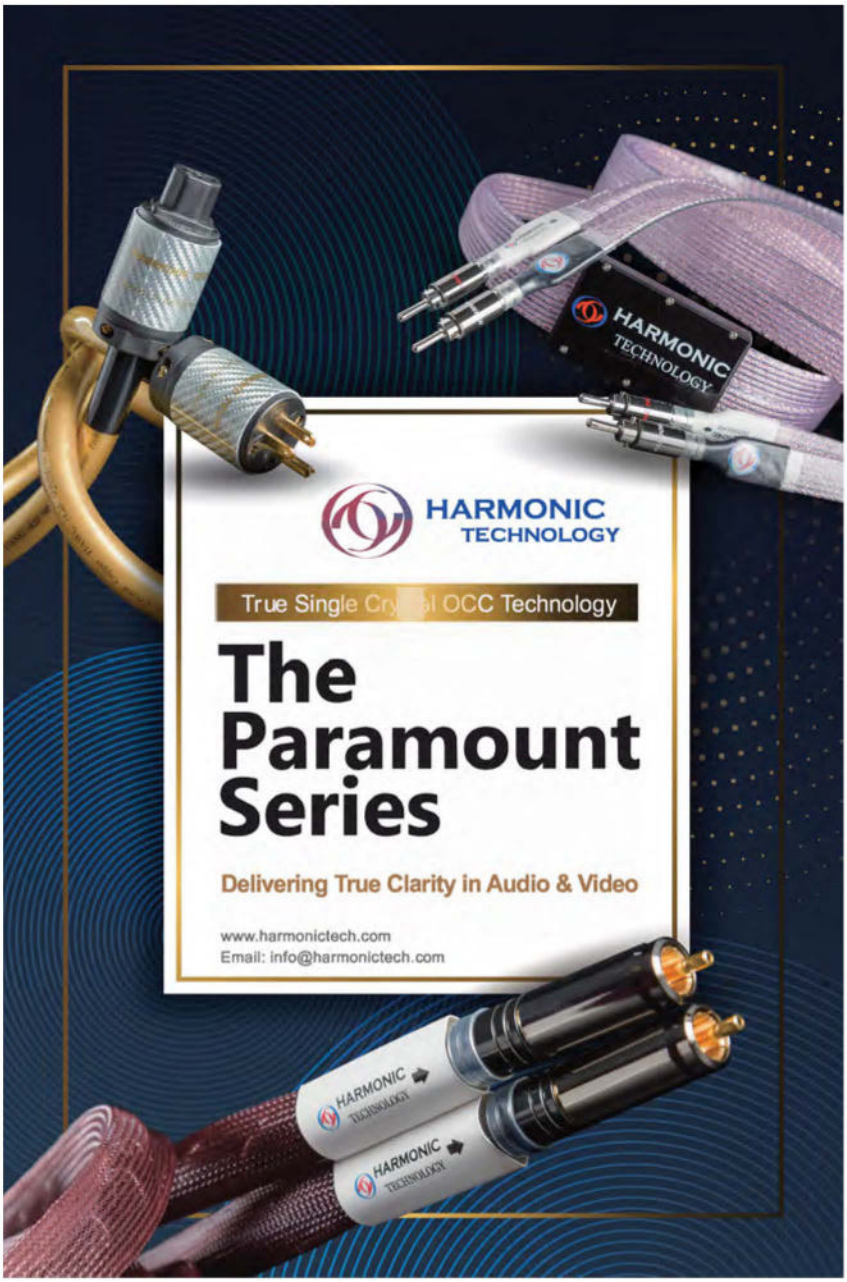
Best Sound (for-the-money)
MoFi SourcePoint 888 loudspeaker
Andrew Jones is a genius. Nobody tell MoFi, but these speakers would still be the best current value in hi-fi at twice the price.

Most Significant Product Introduction
MoFi SourcePoint 888 loudspeaker
See above.

Most Significant Trend
Small, powered loudspeakers ready to accept a data stream via various interfaces or wirelessly. It was no surprise that new products came from specialists like Vanatoo and Kanta, but now it appears that other loudspeaker companies are starting to invade this market space.

Most Coveted Product
Perfect8 Technologies Cube T loudspeaker
The glass enclosure gets your attention but it's the sonic transparency and authority that keeps you coming back for more. Especially having heard this new model, I really, really, really want to review something from this manufacturer. Is that enough "reallys," Robert? tas

Perfect8 Technologies Cube T loudspeaker.



LINN

INTRODUCING

KLIMAX SOLO 800

www.linn.co.uk

Our all-new, **reference mono amplifier** delivers absolute linearity under all conditions; even reducing audible distortion from the loudspeaker itself.

Solo 800 features novel and original technologies – such as Adaptive Bias Control and Utopik power – which combine to produce staggeringly low distortion measurements, superb signal-to-noise ratio, and unrivalled efficiency.

Klimax Solo 800 outperforms larger rivals comprehensively.

Book your demonstration at a Linn specialist:

www.linn.co.uk/try-linn

USA

Arizona Scottsdale / Tempe
LMC Home Entertainment

California Los Angeles
Shelley's Stereo

California
San Fran / San Diego
Basil Audio

California Santa Rosa
Lavish Audio-Video-Control

Colorado Denver
Soundings Fine Audio Video

Colorado Fort Collins
Audio Alternative

Florida Parkland
Audio Florida

Georgia Atlanta
Sound Image

Illinois Wayne
Next Level HiFi

New Hampshire Nashua
Audio Video Therapy

New York Mount Kisco
Accent on Music

New York New York
Innovative Audio

Oregon Portland
Pearl Audio Video

Texas Dallas
Audio Concepts

Texas Houston
Timbre

Virginia Herndon
Elite Audio Solutions

Washington
Seattle
Definitive Audio

CANADA

British Columbia
Vancouver
HiFi Centre

Ontario Whitby
Audio by Mark Jones

Wilson Benesch GMT® One System

The Golden Mean

Michael Fremer

What's with the Roman helmet atop the headshell? Is it science-based or a tribute to 50s era gladiator movies? Is the Starship Enterprise at the back of the arm on a five-year mission to explore new musical worlds? Is it doomed to forever orbit planets Hell Freezes Over and Keith Don't Go, or will it boldly go where no audiophile tonearm has gone before?

Why is there a roulette wheel under the platter and does Wilson Benesch supply the chips and dice, or are those expensive extra-cost accessories? Is W-B doing a "steampunk" thing? Or, after spending a fortune on R&D here, is the company simply going baroque?

Ah, but I kid Wilson Benesch as I previously kidded Continuum and OMA about their very serious products (the former for resembling a chrome-façade New Jersey diner, the latter for looking like The Guggenheim with a construction crane on top). One manufacturer found the prod funny, the other not so much.

Wilson Benesch's GMT® One turntable and Graviton® tonearm (WB calls it the armwand, so that's what we'll use) *appear* to be a combination of fanciful, antique, and sleek; yet the company claims only applied science drives its looks and to prove it, provided me with a telephone-book-sized white paper (have younger readers ever seen a telephone book?).

If I correctly recall, GMT® One prototype parts were on static display as early as Munich High End 2019, including a version of the Graviton® armwand. At the 2022 show, W-B showed but didn't play a production model GMT® One. In other words, they brought one to Munich, set it up, but wouldn't play it. That led more than a few reviewers to facetiously quip they didn't think Wilson Benesch would *ever* actually play a record on a GMT® One at the Munich show. "Facetious" because ex-

HANA UMAMI BLUE

UMAMI SOUND - EXCEPTIONAL MUSICAL QUALITY

2023 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

"With the Blue, **HANA** has set another baseline of performance-for-cost, even against competitors into the upper four-digit range. A sonic winner..."

- Andre Jennings, *The Absolute Sound*, January 2024

"The **HANA Umami Blue** brings that high-end cartridge 'wow' factor at a stunning, attainable price. It looks great and it sounds great."

- Alan Sircom, *hi-fi+*, Issue 226

hi-fi+ WINNER 2023 TURNTABLE CARTRIDGE UP TO £5K

HANA

UMAMI BLUE

"The Blue very well may be the sweetheart of the **HANA** line. The **HANA Umami Blue** clearly earns my Reviewers Choice Award for a superb phono cartridge design at such an attractive price!"

- Robert Levi, *Positive Feedback Online*, December 2023
PF Writers' Choice Award, 2023

HANACARTRIDGES.COM

perienced reviewers are well familiar with Wilson Benesch's long turntable-manufacturing history.

The company was founded in 1989 to produce turntables just as vinyl was supposedly on its way out. To help get British government funding for the turntable project at that vinyl-precarious time (and to justify it), Wilson Benesch's grant application includes this rationale: "The collectability and vast quantity of vinyl records worldwide are crucial factors in the enduring popularity of the vinyl format. Vinyl will continue to be valued for its natural warm, organic tones, and distinctive sonic character, which engage listeners in a unique way that sets in apart from other formats." Exactly my thinking in 1989 and today, too. The government bought, and W-B was born.

In 1991 the company introduced the A.C.T. One—the first commercially available single-piece molded-carbon-fiber tonearm. All the carbon fiber seen and used in the audiophile world followed W-B's pioneering efforts—kind of like Krell and blue LEDs.

At a well-attended High End 2023 press event, Wilson Benesch introduced the finished GMT® One System, accompanied by a thorough, detailed, eye-popping, jaw-dropping A/V presentation explaining the system's design and execution, after which it *finally* played records using a pair of large, Wilson Benesch floor-standing loudspeakers—ones with a quartet of the business-end-out drivers that always look to me like they need athletic supporters. Unfortunately, the sound produced in that demo was, as reviewers often diplomatically put it, "wanting." Familiar records fundamentally sounded "off" and disappointing.

Nonetheless when W-B's Craig Milnes offered a world-exclusive GMT® One System review for *The Absolute Sound*, who would say no?

Last Fall Craig, Wilson Benesch's Director of Design and Engineering, and his son Luke, International Sales Director, arrived from the U.K. crates-in-S.U.V., and within a fairly short time—considering the system's complexity—had it assembled in my listening room and ready for play. Its unique looks made a splash, but at 29" wide and 19" deep it's far from the biggest turntable I've had here—not that size matters—and unlike some it will fit comfortably into most systems and homes.

This system is only superficially related to more "basic" active pneumatic isolation stands like the Sounds of Silence Vibraplane that I once owned.

The GMT® One System

The system's foundation is the R1 Rack which dates to 2015— a super-sturdy, high-mass, tiered design created specifically for the GMT® One System, with each tier connected by "nodes" possessing different energy-transfer characteristics and manufactured using non-crystalline materials having "negligible energy management properties." W-B says it's the first rack to incorporate high-compression carbon-fiber, one-ton-load-capable cross members, using fewer than 130 grams (less than 5 ounces) of carbon.

Its strength, "rigorously tested at Sheffield Hallam University," indicated that the shelf's top tier could accommodate a nearly 2-ton load. W-B claims the R1 Rack creates the shortest and most direct structural link between the ground (in my case, a concrete slab floor under the carpeting) and the GMT® One System. In an analog coincidence, another government project involved in creating this rack system's materials is named SSUCHY.

The rack's top tier holds the E.V.A. laminated glass top, the unique Omega Drive system featuring the world's largest diameter, 3-phase synchronous, high-precision, zero-cogging motor-and-bearing system, and the Graviton® armwand—incorporating a number of firsts: the first armwand grown from titanium/carbon-fiber-Graphene-enhanced damping hybrid; first arm parts to exploit A.I. design techniques; first remote control VTA/SRA system adjustable with greater accuracy than any tonearm *ever* thanks to a unique piezo device and smartphone-based app, microprocessor-controlled control system; and first arm the rear of which looks like the Starship Enterprise—but more about *that* later.

All floats, isolated within the top section's base on a Thorlabs (New Jersey, USA) Optical Isolation system usually found under electron microscopes, but designed and adapted specifically for this application. It uses computer-controlled pneumatic actuators to both isolate and self-level the supporting platform, which in this case is the turntable. This system is only superficially related to more "basic" active pneumatic isolation stands like the Sounds of Silence Vibraplane that I once owned. Keeping the Vibraplane level required carefully centering the mass and/or making frequent, minute adjustments to the leveling controls. This is a "no-fiddling" system.

However, because the GMT® One's large, heavy motor/platter assembly is offset

The Voice That Is

TIDAL
we build emotions.

**Transparency...
closer than you think.**

2024 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

2023 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

REVIEWER the absolute sound REFERENCE

Contact The Authorized TIDAL Audio Partner In Your Region.

East	Central	West
www.thevoicethatis.com	www.artisanfidelity.com	www.audio-ultra.com
Premium TIDAL Audio Partner	TIDAL Audio Partner	TIDAL Audio Partner
610.359.0189	219.933.8115	253.321.3204

Specs & Pricing

GMT® One Turntable
Omega Drive System: Synchronous 15" diameter, 21 coreless-slotless, 3 phase zero-cogging, zero torque ripple, patent applied for direct drive motor.
Alpha Drive: Computer controlled quartz referenced high precision sine waves. 3 super linear class A amplifiers. Computer controlled remote control systems. Computer controlled pneumatic self-levelling control for LeVeL isolation system.
Speed range: 33.3, 45, and 78pm fully adjustable via dedicated Smart Device WB Control APP in 0.1 increments.
Wow and flutter: Not measurable
LeVeL Isolation System: Fully configurable according to specific requirements of any environment. No requirement for adjustment. Fully autonomous.
R1 rack: Provides optimal location of all Alpha Drive & Omega Drive systems. Enables complete concealment of all energy systems. WB Control App on smart device: Provide GUI for complete remote control over all critical aspects of system including VTA (accurate to 1nM) start/stop, speed, and lift/lower. Router provided with the unit, preconfigured with Wi-Fi connection to the smart device preinstalled with the WB Control App. Does not connect to the internet.
Compressor: Medical grade silent running system to deliver energy to LeVeL pneumatic isolation system.
System Weight: 369.5 kg /523 lbs.

Graviton® Armwand
Delivered with cartridge precisely setup / screwed and semi permanently bonded to the carbon fibre headshell. Storage case supplied. Silver./Teflon wire.
Effective length: 304.8mm
Mounting distance: 291.6mm
Offset Angle: 18°
Overhang: 13.2mm
Effective tonearm mass: 14gm

Tessellate Ti-S Cartridge
Body: U.D. Carbon-fiber hybrid-cantilever titanium
Cantilever: Boron, sapphire, and diamond available.
Stylus: micro-ridge diamond (5x80µm)
VTA: 20 degrees
Coil: Pure iron square
Weight: 14 grams
Output: 0.35mV@3.54CM/s
Internal impedance: 6 ohms
Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz ±1dB
Channel separation: <35dB@1kHz
Channel balance: <1dB
Dynamic compliance: 12µM/mN
Recommended load: 100–200ohms
Recommended tracking force: 1.8g

Price: $302,000 ($371,900 as reviewed)

WILSON BENESCH LTD.
Falcon House
Limestone Cottage Lane
Sheffield, S6 1NJ, United Kingdom
+44 (0)114 285 2656
Wilson Benesch.com

AAUDIO IMPORTS (U.S. Distributor)
(303) 264-8831
aaudioimports.com

Associated Equipment (for this review)
Loudpeakers: Wilson Audio Specialties Chronosonic XVX
Preamplifier: darTZeel NHB-18NS
Power amplifier: darTZeel NHB 468 monoblocks
Phono preamplifier: CH Precision P10
Phono cartridges: Lyra Atlas Lambda SL, Ortofon MC Diamond,
Cable and interconnects: AudioQuest Dragon & TARA Labs The Zero Evolution & Analysis Plus Silver Apex & Stealth Sakra and Indra (interconnects), Esprit Eureka Phono cables, AudioQuest Dragon, Thunder and Dynamic Design Neutron GS Digital (A.C. power cords)
Accessories: AudioQuest Niagara 7000 (line level), Niagara 5000s (amplifiers) CAD Ground Controls; AudioQuest NRG Edison A.C. wall box and receptacles, ASC Tube traps, RPG BAD, Skyline & Abffusor panels, Stillpoints Aperture II room panels, Stillpoints ESS and HRS Signature stands, Thixar and Stillpoints amplifier stands, Audiodharma Cable Cooker, Furutech Record demagnetizer, Orb Disc Flattener, Audiodesksysteme Vinyl Cleaner Pro X, Kirmuss Audio KA-RC-1 and Klaudio KD-CLN-LP200T record cleaning machines, full suite WallyTools

from the platform's center and its center of gravity greatly differs from typical Thorlabs applications, to accommodate the computer-controlled pneumatic actuators W-B had to design a compensatory weight and center-of-gravity distribution system. The result is a 100% reliable, self-leveling platform that operates completely in the background. You won't know it's there or hear the large oil-free pump (which can be in another room), unless you or a friend, knees weakened by the quality of the music they hear, leans on the glass top. Otherwise, and even then, the pump rarely activates.

The shelf below holds the Alpha Drive power supply/controller, which is critical to getting the motor to behave as intended. W-B describes in the white paper a series of failed projects, including one based on a magnetically coupled platter (2008) and a second one attempting a magnetic geared motor (2012) and finally 2019's GMT® Consortium that with the help of a £326,000 grant, created both the unique optimally torqued Omega Drive motor and the requisite Alpha Drive.

A "world-class team" in-

Van Halen *Van Halen II*
UltraDisc One-Step 180g 45RPM 2LP Set
Limited to 7,500 copies

These and many more definitive reissues are available at **MoFi.com** and leading independent record stores

The New Cronus "***Dark***" Integrated

...Profoundly illuminating

ROGUE AUDIO

Relish a new level of finesse!

pure tube • pure Rogue • pure delight...only $4,495...

Rogue Audio, Inc • Brodheadsville, PA • 570-992-9901 • www.rogueaudio.com

cluding a trio of college professors—experts in electro-magnetic structural engineering, dynamic electro-magnetics, coil winding, and precision machining of metals and polymers—created a slotless, synchronous, "circumjacent radial force design," said to eliminate noise and vibrations to produce smooth and precise platter rotation and speed stability with measured ultra-low RMS torque ripple of 0.001342 (N.m). The motor weighs 31 pounds and resembles no other turntable drive.

The Alpha Drive power supply, featuring a trio of "pure, super-linear amplifiers producing three sinusoidal 24-volt RMS, low-current, 120 degree phase-shifted quartz-referenced drive signals" (nothing conceptually unusual here), was developed in parallel with the motor and in conjunction with Wilson Benesch, Sheffield Hallam University, the aforementioned professorial trio, and by the Broomfields, Dr. Carl and Neil of CAAS Audio, whose line of high-performance amplification products are not imported to the United States. The white paper describes the duo as "graduate professionals from the electronics and software disciplines." They also developed the remote phone app. The Omega Drive motor/Alpha Drive power supply system has a patent pending.

It's clear from looking at it that the motor is a unique design featuring an unusually high number (21) of large stator coils (wound by W-B on specially designed coil-winding machinery) arrayed around the platter and mounted onto a high-precision super-rigid structure, creating a rotor with an unusually large 456mm diameter. Rotor size and placement of the neodymium iron boron magnets required finite element modeling and a great deal of R&D, the result being a motor that, once the system achieves synchronicity, requires no feedback or complex speed compensation. According to a supplied image, the magnetic-flux distribution around the coil system is remarkably uniform. The motor/bearing system is an extremely complex assemblage of many parts, all of which are manufactured in-house by Wilson Benesch, except for the magnets and the sintered tungsten-carbide bearing shaft manufactured locally for W-B.

Evenly spaced high-mass metal cylinders made from austenitic steel placed around the platter's periphery as far as possible from the center of rotation, increase the moment of inertia, which allows lowering the platter mass. This makes achieving the proper balance between torque and mass easier, which Wilson Benesch avers is critical in designing an effective direct-drive platter system.

You'll note the clear acrylic platter. It's among the simplest and least costly components in this six-figure assemblage. W-B makes the case for acrylic over various metals or Delrin or any other material, claiming energy moving through the vinyl produced by the stylus/groove interface "crashes" against materials with a different acoustic impedance but passes without reflection into materials with the same acoustic impedance, after which it gradually dissipates. That's acrylic's advantage, W-B concluded, after manufacturing the easily replaceable top platter from various materials.

Cost or eye appeal was not the object here. W-B says the not particularly high, carefully considered platter mass is critical to avoid unwanted sympathetic resonances within the audio band and to insure optimal system damping. The cone-shaped bearing shaft/platter interface is called a Morse taper. So no, it's not a roulette wheel. It just kind of looks like one, or in red, like a Devo hat.

Finally, there's the 48-pound FrACTal metal chassis, which includes, machined into its two-part clamshell design, pockets containing a collection of 18 different damping materials plus the glass top plate, the goal of which is to eliminate excitation of the metal caused by airborne vibrations. The motor is so quiet W-B avers, it requires no energy control, while the pneumatic suspension system blocks structural born energy.

If Nature Grew a Tonearm It Might Look Like The Graviton®

That's Wilson Benesch's claim, backed up in part with a photo of a complex lattice-bone bird wing. Buying into that claim, nature went with a 304.8mm effective length unipivot design, using a secure positioning, triple-one-millimeter, ball-bearing interface in which the point sits. Two are of ultra-low friction zirconium (having one made of a different material is a resonance-buster).

A single-piece, molded, tapered carbon-fiber tube incorporating a quadruple helix construction further reinforced by a Graphene epoxy matrix and a Rohacell interior sandwich section forms the arm's basic structure, which is reminiscent of the original A.C.T. Though it uses the same mold as the original, the design has undergone de-

cades of development in collaboration with numerous scientists and engineers, using measurement, materials, and manufacturing techniques unavailable in 1981.

The point of the exercise is to create an armwand that measurably achieves specific stiffness and damping and that reliably and efficiently transfers energy.

Selective laser sintering (SLS) using titanium produces the basics of the metal structure plus the counterweight to which the carbon-fiber tube is visco-elastically-bonded and by which it is further supported. The arm's arch section features a "tessellated," "see-through" section of repeating hexagonal lattices that adds stiffness and damping while reducing mass and helping to maintain the desired low center of gravity to achieve in all planes single-point stability.

The basic concept is to avoid abrupt interfaces that produce vibrational reflections (colorfully put in the white paper as "avoiding an abrupt cliff face"). That's one reason the arm appears to mechanically "flow" and why the carbon-fiber/titanium interface is so lengthy, and the surface area so large. There are no bolts or clamps in that interface, though the two halves of the titanium "brace" bolt together.

Far more is involved in the arm's design concept and execution, but there's not the space to go into complete detail. Here are a few more points: the resonant behavior of various materials and structural concepts helped produce the final arm design, which features in addition to solid sections, portions that are hollow or tessellated, and even some, like the hollow pods at the end of the "Enterprise"-like wing structures, where the powder contained within has been purposely left un-sintered. Of course, the pods' unusual, complex "twisty" shape is also not accidental. All these design choices are based upon measured performance shown in the white paper telephone book, not the whimsy that the final design ended up resembling.

Wilson Benesch adapted an Ecogrip high-precision hydraulic machining-chuck to act as the arm mount/VTA adjustment shaft, locating it directly under the unipivot bearing. The arm shaft can be securely clamped in place like a machine tool or left loose with no sonic or mechanical compromise, so it can be raised or lowered by remote control within 1 nanometer repeatable accuracy via a linear piezo actuator. The arm wire exit is close to directly atop the bearing and terminates in a LIMO or LIMO-type mini-multipin connector that plugs into a socket located directly above the arm within a platform bolted to the rear of the upper rack tier. The arrangement keeps the wire extremely short and attempts to avoid potential azimuth and anti-skating irregularities caused by a wire-arc configuration.

The Tessellate MC Cartridge

The supplied "Tessellate" cartridge features a complex curvature, tessellated SLS titanium body and top plate and uses a micro-ridge stylus bonded to a sapphire cantilever (W-B offers a choice of boron, sapphire, or Diamond), in the midsection of which is a unidirectional-carbon-fiber damping ring. A pure-iron square coil is on the other end. Output is 0.35mV, recommended tracking force is 1.6–1.9g (1.8g optimum), and I'll

NEW GENERATION
PROFESSIONAL TAPE MACHINE

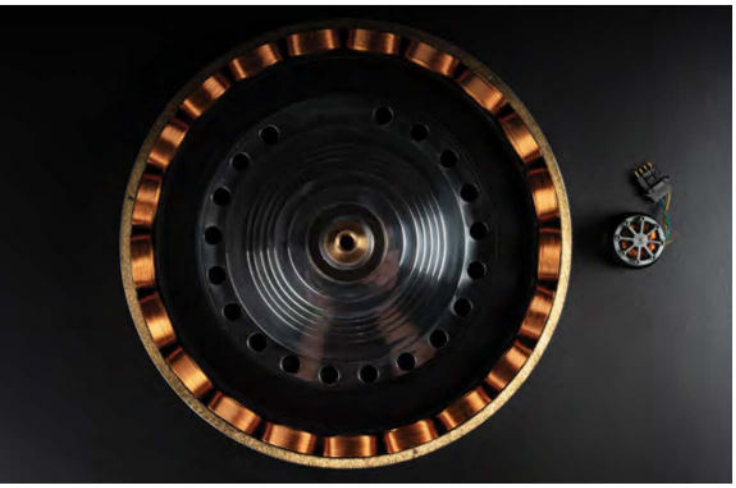
AAD-TP-1000

75th Year ReVox Anniversary

What's Old is Young Again

ProAudio Ltd

Your Analog Tape Source
proaudio@comcast.net
847-526-1600



skip the other specs other than to report that W-B claims this cartridge body has the highest known specific stiffness ever seen in any cartridge. The handsome mirrored-gold finish is a titanium nitride vapor deposition.

When you order a Tessellate cartridge for this armwand, it comes pre-mounted on the head shell (utilizing the "roman helmet," Wilson Benesch calls a "Fin") and "perfectly aligned" (though the white paper, to my frustration omits which alignment is used) and bolted to the head shell with a thin layer of visco-elastomer adhesive in between. The helmet is there for a purpose as measured and not to honor gladiator movies, though I think Kirk Douglas or Russell Crowe every time I glance at it.

The GMT® Control App

The Android-based app is Wi-Fi controlled via a LAN setup using a small, supplied router. It's not connected to your home's network. W-B supplied a Samsung phone loaded with both the GMT® Control App and for the purposes of this review the CH Precision's P10 app, which itself permits a wide variety of setting options.

From the GMT® Control App, all while seated (or standing) you can start the platter spinning, cue the arm up and down and adjust VTA/SRA in *micrometers* displayed on the screen as you do it. The app monitors speed as the table begins to spin, and it won't let you lower the arm until the correct speed is achieved, which takes approximately ten seconds. You can also use it to trim speed.

You won't miss this remote-control feature until you have it, and then you don't. To be able to sit yourself down, get comfortable, and *then* lower the stylus onto the record (or raise it when the phone rings) are convenience features you quickly get accustomed to—not to mention VTA/SRA on-the-fly adjustability, while looking at your fly.

As long as you're sitting, the GMT® One Turntable's retail price is $302,000, excluding armwands, cartridges, and rack. It includes the Omega and Alpha Drive system, LeVeL isolation system, Stage One transformer, Piezo VTA, and Smart Remote Control.

The system as reviewed in standard finish costs $371,900. It consists of the GMT® Turntable with the Graviton® Ti Armwand, Tessellate Ti-S Sapphire Cartridge, and the R1 Rack. Two other cantilever variants are available: Diamond Ti-D and Boron Ti-B. All feature the titanium body. Those ordering two armwands get a complimentary cartridge: order Diamond, get Sapphire; Order Sapphire, get the Boron. This ensures that customers always have a WB cartridge when the reference cartridge is out for retipping.

What I Heard

What I heard in Munich so concerned me I wanted to limit variables, so I asked for a second rear-mount platform that bypassed the step-up transformer and a second armwand to mount known cartridges. I wanted to limit the variables in case of sonic disappointment.

Once the system had been set up with the Tessellate cartridge and the first record played, it was clear that the turntable was not the problem. The cartridge was not the problem. There *were* no problems, and using the turntable was easy and pleasurable. Despite being a unipivot, there's zero "arm flop."

Wilson Benesch designed the GMT® One as a *system*, and though they were willing to accommodate my reviewer needs, that for the most part turned out to be unnecessary.

The presentation was remarkably expansive, three-dimensional, timbrally neutral, image-solid, utterly effortless from the start—serious steps above anything I've previously experienced playing records (something I do not write capriciously)—and it became dramatically more transparent when I removed the transformer interface and ran the Tessellate cartridge directly into the CH Precision P10. Not a close call at all. Image palpability and attack delicacy were off the charts. Low-level detail-retrieval and microdynamics greatly improved, though even with the transformer they were already amazing. Glad I requested the bypass!

Though I tried a few other familiar cartridges (Ortofon Diamond, Lyra Atlas Lambda SL), and they delivered expected sonics with their personalities further clarified by the turntable/arm combo, I quickly realized that buyers of this turntable will more likely than not buy into the *system* to begin with and perhaps later add a second armwand with a known second stereo or mono cartridge. The system was designed for record players not for turntable tweakers (though you can do that if you wish).

To use another cartridge, just swap out arms. The second one will be set-up and ready to play. A costly swap, but when you're already buying a house-priced turntable, is that really a concern?

Goldilocks

During Covid I simultaneously had here for review the giant Air Force Zero, which Jacob Heilbrunn owns, and the OMA K3, the prototype of which I ended up buying. These were two top-performing turntables with totally different sonic personalities. The direct-drive OMA was quick, tight, nimble, super-focused, and rhythmically exciting,

The New Sphinx Magnum

And you thought it couldn't get any better...

ROGUE AUDIO

The newly refined Tube/Solid State integrated amplifier from Rogue Audio

100 WPC • MM/MC phono pre-amp • discrete headphone amp • pure Rogue...only $1,995

Rogue Audio, Inc • Brodheadsville, PA • 570-992-9901 • www.rogueaudio.com

The Voice That Is

van den Hul

The New Grail SX

"...you'll really appreciate what The Grail SX will deliver."

~ Michael Fremer - *The Absolute Sound* - March 2024

www.thevoicethatis.com

610.359.0189

though timbrally somewhat less than sumptuous. You could say lean. The belt-drive Air Force Zero was the opposite: It took its time lingering over attack, with luxuriously textured events and long, generous sustain. It turned the "color" knob up more than a few notches, even beyond what I consider neutral.

One sounded "fast" almost eager to get to the next event; the other daringly insistent on slowing time, grand in scale, almost confrontational, and like the "elephant in the room" difficult to ignore. You could say one was ideal for rock and the other for classical, both good for jazz and based on that description I don't have to tell you which was which though I've heard great rock and classical performances on both.

I'd want an "analytical" cartridge to tighten up and absorb some of the Zero's bloom and grandiosity, bordering on sluggishness, and I'd want a lusher cartridge for the OMA K3's dryness. The original Lyra Atlas was not a good K3 fit, but the Lambda is. I replaced the girder-like, precise but somewhat lean Schröder arm with the more bass-insistent SAT CF1-12, which was a better fit for my sonic and musical tastes. In other words, I'd bought a fine performer that I felt I could customize to better reflect my sonic preferences and system needs, and I did.

The GMT® One *System* provides the best of both of those turntables: It is grand in scale and produces sumptuous, I'd say sensuous, instrumental textures and harmonic richness. It lingers like the Zero, but it has the K3's agile timekeeping and nimbleness. Its transient performance is effortless and artifact-free, and its micro-dynamic expressiveness and ability to portray the tiniest of low-level gestures border on the insane. Its imaging and soundstaging consistency, solidity, and three-dimensional layering are without question sensational and produced the best spatial presentation I've heard from the Wilson Audio Specialties XVX Chronosonic speakers, but to fully describe it really requires a few new words I've yet to come up with.

On good recordings the GMT® sets up a solid main event across the stage in "reach out and touch it" fashion in front of the speakers and it then layers behind and to the sides the secondary instruments and accompaniment—all in three dimensions. The D2D Bruckner 7th with Haitink conduction the BPO has never sounded this immediate and present, nor have the strings and Wagner horns sounded so convincing.

One of the most impressive aspects of the GMT® One's sonic performance is its ability to simultaneously deliver hard and aggressive, and soft and supple. I don't think I've previously experienced this level of sonic mutability, at least not without a cartridge swap.

We are the world's foremost experts on system matching

ABYSS
ACOUSTECH ELECTRONICS
ACOUSTIC REVIVE
ACOUSTIC SIGNATURE
ACOUSTIC SYSTEM
ACOUSTIC ZEN
ACOUSTICAL SYSTEMS
ACROLINK
AESTHETIX
AIR TIGHT
ALLNIC/ZL TECHNOLOGIES
ALPHA CORE GOERTZ
ALPHA DESIGN LABS
ANALOGMAGIK
ANALOGUE PRODUCTION
ANALYSIS PLUS
AUDIENCE
AUDIO DESK SYSTEME
AUDIO MAGIC
AUDIO REPLAS
AUDIOQUEST
AUDIOSHIELD
BACKERT LABS
BDR SOUND ENHANCEMENT
BELLA SOUND
BLACK CAT CABLE
BLUE HORIZON
BOB'S DEVICES
BUTCHER BLOCK ACOUSTICS
BYBEE
CABLE TOWER
CARDAS AUDIO
CHANG LIGHTSPEED
CHORD COMPANY
CHORD ELECTRONICS
CLEARAUDIO
CONTACT ENHANCER
CRYSTAL CABLE
DAN CLARK AUDIO
DH LABS SILVER SONIC
DS AUDIO
DYNAMIQUE AUDIO
DYNAVECTOR
ELEVEN XI AUDIO
ELROD POWER SYSTEMS
ENGLISH ELECTRIC
ENTREQ
ESP ESSENTIAL SOUND
EXTREME PHONO
FEICKERT
FERRUM
FINITE ELEMENTE
FOCAL
FOSGATE
FURUTECH
GINGKO AUDIO
GOLD NOTE
GOLDEN SOUND
GRADO LABS
GRAHAM ENGINEERING
GUTWIRE
HANA CARTRIDGES
HARBETH
HARMONIC TECHNOLOGY
HART AUDIO
HELIUS DESIGNS
HERBIE'S AUDIO LAB
HRS HARMONIC RESOLUTION
IFI AUDIO
IKEDA
ISOACOUSTICS INC
ISOCLEAN POWER
ISOTEK
JORMA DESIGN
JPS LABS
KAB
KIMBER KABLE
KOETSU
KR AUDIO
L'ART DU SON
LAB12
LAMM INDUSTRIES
LEHMANN AUDIO
LESSLOSS AUDIO
LITTLE FWEND
LYRA
MAGNAN AUDIO CABLES
MARIGO LAB
MEZE HEADPHONES
MOBILE FIDELITY MOFI
MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS
NEOTECH
NITTY GRITTY
NORDOST
NUPRIME AUDIO
ONZOW
ORTOFON
OYAIDE
PHASEMATION
PRANAWIRE
PRIMARE
PURE VINYL
PURIST AUDIO DESIGN
QUADRASPIRE
QUANTUM PHYSICS
REGA
REL ACOUSTICS
ROGUE AUDIO
RSX TECHNOLOGIES
SENNHEISER
SHAKTI INNOVATIONS
SHELTER
SHUNYATA RESEARCH
SILTECH CABLES
SNAKE RIVER AUDIO
SOLIDSTEEL
SOUND ANCHORS
SOUNDSMITH
STEALTH AUDIO
STEINMUSIC
STILLPOINTS
STRAIGHT WIRE
SUMIKO
SUTHERLAND ENGINEERING
SYMPOSIUM ACOUSTICS
SYNERGISTIC RESEARCH
T+A ELEKTROAKUSTIK
TARA LABS
TARGET
THORENS
TONTRÄGER
TRI-PLANAR
VAN DEN HUL
VIBRAPOD COMPANY
VICOUSTIC
VOODOO CABLE
WARWICK ACOUSTICS
WATTGATE
WBT
WIREWORLD CABLE
WOLF AUDIO SYSTEMS
WYWIRES
XLO

David Bowie's *Hunky Dory* (EMI100 Centennial edition) is piano-based and string-drenched, but it also has some aggressive tracks, including the heavily percussive "Andy Warhol," hard-edged electric guitars on "Queen Bitch," and subtle, reverb-drenched acoustic strums on "The Bewlay Brothers." It's a record I've played (in various editions) for 50+ years. The GMT® One produced from this record the richest, most supple string textures and colors and put them in distinct three-dimensional space as I've never heard them, while delivering the piano (sometimes two) more vividly and percussively correct than I've ever heard it sound. Each note's attack, sustain, and decay was an easily followed event. New details emerged from every track.

Following all this warmth on "Andy Warhol," Mick Ronson produces muscular, angry, and somewhat harsh acoustic guitar strums along with snappy hard-edged percussion that sounds like he's beating a marble slab with a leather strap. I expected the hits to sound softened given the earlier supple strings, but instead they were delivered harder and snappier than I've ever heard them, and for the first time I could hear each snap's distinctive character and in a space of its own. Happily, I didn't bet on any of my predictions.

How's this for a segue way? The day Byron Janis died I chose to honor him with the Mercury "Living Presence" 35mm recording of Prokofiev Piano Concerto No. 3/Rachmaninoff Concerto No.1 with Kondrashin conducting the Moscow Philharmonic (SR90300). The hall appears, then the at-times jazz-like performance begins, dazzling in every way but especially the piano's transparency, the pianist's delicate, cascading. note-by-note touch, and the stability of both in three-dimensional space. The complete lack of congestion even during complex passages separates the GMT® One from anything else I've heard (though in its own way the inexpensive Supatrac arm does a very similar thing). The combination of woodwinds, brass, piano, and horns never sounded congested, hardened, or steely. The piano on this record has never sounded as convincing, nor has the orchestra—all set transparently, almost ghost-like against a black background. There are mint copies on Discogs now for around $30. The times they have changed.

Usually, to get the best results, lights need to go out, and you have to be in the right head space. But as I'm writing this, I'm revisiting the Prokofiev to be sure I wasn't hallucinating, and with the bright lights on mid-afternoon I feel as if the record has disappeared, and the hall and orchestra are in front of me. Okay, it's not Atmos so it doesn't surround, but this is eerie—more

Cables Unlock Performance

Our Lending Library will prove that!

Our Audio Experts will guide you towards unlocking your audio system's full potential.
Our unique $3,000,000 Lending Library allows you to borrow fully burned-in cables and other products.
Hear our recommendations for yourself, at home, in your own system.

Finally hear all the music you've been missing!

215-862-4870 TheCableCo.com THE CABLE COMPANY Home of the only Audiophile Lending Library

convincing than anything in the digital domain has ever produced here and surprising for a Mercury, dead quiet. Better, I know when the performance concludes I can put on *London Calling*, and it will produce a you're in the studio with Bill Price and The Clash experience or I'm in the The Blackhawk with Miles. This is one of those "Yes, I've said these things before but it's not like this" moments. I can't describe this system's colorations or its general timbral personality. It doesn't seem to have one.

Quibbles

I have a few: Wilson Benesch went to the trouble and expense of bolting to the back of the turntable a platform that hangs over the arm directly above where the tonearm wire/plug exits as described in the review. It was done for a good reason.

The problem is that the wire is too long, so it's got a kink in it that can affect both azimuth and anti-skating. Consequently, you have to fiddle with it, and even when you think it's perfect it probably isn't, though once I'd adjusted it so that lowering the arm didn't pull it into the grooves, I didn't hear any problems. Still, it's a most imprecise configuration for such a precision machine. The solution seems simple, so I don't know why W-B didn't think of it. All it must do is machine slots into the plexiglass where the bolts hold the platform to the chassis. That way the platform can be raised or lowered to remove the kink, though the VTA/SRA adjustment might affect this, but the kink is an issue. Perhaps less stiff wire?

Another issue is that since the arm's center of gravity has been designed to be well below the pivot to create stability, raising or lowering the back of the arm will definitely change tracking force. And the final one is that when you raise or lower the rear of the arm to adjust VTA/SRA on an arm with an offset at the headshell, you most definitely also affect azimuth! So. if you sit and listen and then adjust VTA/SRA from your seat, and "dial it in" to where you like it, you are most likely listening to both tracking force and azimuth changes along with VTA/SRA. There's no way around it.

The combination of the Tessellate cartridge and the turntable produced the best sound I've heard from vinyl records of every musical genre.

Conclusion

Though the GMT® One's design appears fanciful and somewhat "steam punk"-like, Wilson Benesch claims, and the evidence it provided indicates, that science guided its looks. The proof is in the listening and based upon that—and I've had more than four months with it— I must conclude that the system, the combination of the Tessellate cartridge and the turntable produced the best sound I've heard from vinyl records of every musical genre.

If you ask me in which direction the sound leans, cool or warm, smooth or etchy, dark or light, whatever descriptor you choose, I'd have no answer, which is interesting because it didn't take long for me to hear in which directions the other two six-digit turntables I've had here leaned—and I don't mean to minimize the contribution of the CH Precision P10.

The good news is that Wilson Benesch plans a line of less costly turntables based on this design.

My air-conditioner maintenance guy—in his twenties—came into my listening room to have me sign the receipt on his iPad. He'd never seen anything like what's here, so I offered to play him his choice. It was Led Zeppelin, so I played him the famous Robert Ludwig *Led Zep II* pressing but on the Rega Naia through the Ypsilon VPS100 phono preamp. When it was over he was properly dazzled, and as all shook up as he should have been. It's a great table and phono preamp costing in excess of $70,000.

"Let me play it for you on this," I said, and I played it on the GMT® One. Not long after it started, but before it got too loud for me to hear him, he blurted out, "This is so much better! I can't believe it!" And for 20 times the cost it should be, and it is. We are not done digging the goods out of the grooves.

Late breaking news: The day I completed the guts of this review, a leak developed in the ThorLabs air-suspension system somewhere inside the Alpha Drive unit. I could hear the hissing and the pump, which I never heard over the four months, began to cycle. The cure for now was to shut it down and run the table unsuspended, but honestly, in my concrete-floor situation I didn't hear a difference. (I have to thank AudioQuest for providing a fifteen-foot-long Thunder A.C. cable needed to reach the turntable and CH P10.) tas

Close your eyes...
You are there...

VAC

Always handcrafted in the USA

Contact us for the name of your nearest VAC dealer.

Valve Amplification Company **www.vac-amps.com**

©2024 Valve Amplification Company, Inc. VAC power amplifiers are protected by US Patent 8,749,310. International patents pending.

SHUNYATA RESEARCH

GAMMA SERIES // THETA SERIES

SIGNAL CABLES

NEW!

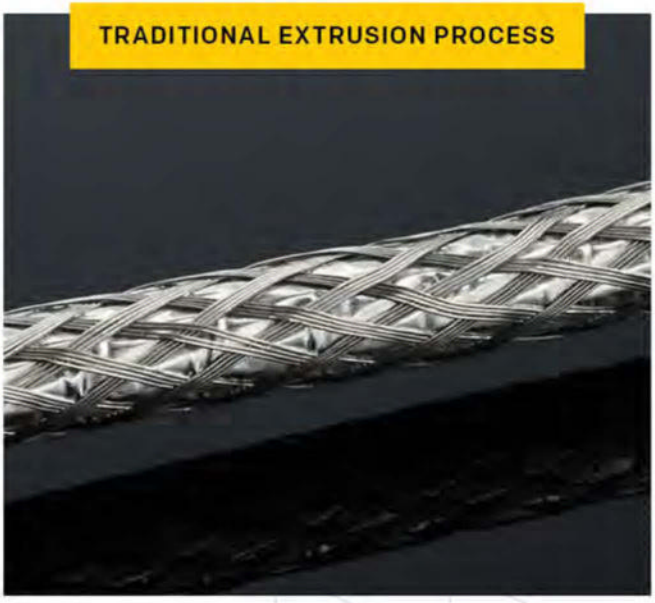
Advancing Conductor Science

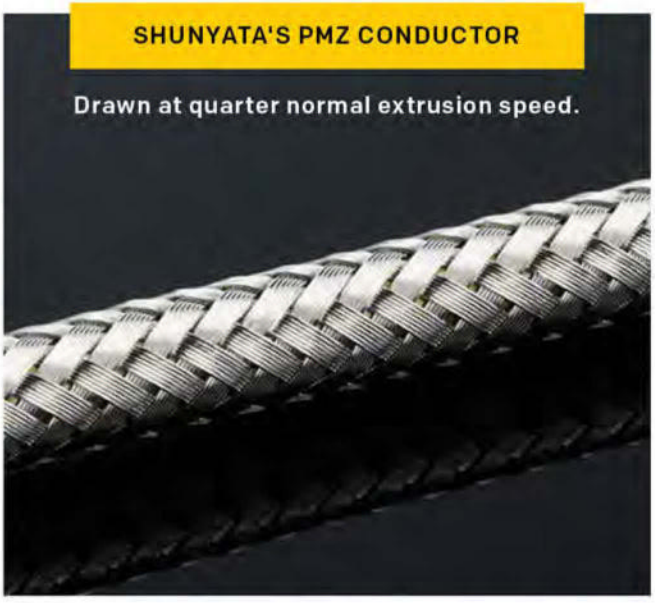
Within a rich 25 year history that includes 13 patents, applications in heart surgery labs and 3rd-party measured results, the ground-breaking conductor science in the new **Gamma Series** and **Theta Series** signal cables may be Shunyata Research's most consequential achievement.

UPENDING TRADITION

Gamma Series and Theta Series signal cables feature a *one-of-a-kind* extrusion method called the *Precision Matched Impedance Process*™ (PMZ™). When combined with Shunyata's custom-designed parts, ultra-pure Ohno (OCC) copper and proprietary Kinetic Phase Inversion Process™ (KPIP v2™) metal treatment, the performance of these cables will startle even the most experienced listeners, musicians or sound engineers.

See your local Shunyata Research retailer today, schedule an evaluation!





PMZ Ohno KPIP v2™

PERFORMANCE WITHOUT COMPROMISE

What separates Gamma Series and Theta Series cables from others, regardless of cost, is the complete absence of artificial compression in sound. Music simply flows, but with a suddenness, timing accuracy and unconstrained dynamics that belies the natural tonal and timbrel nature of these OCC conductors. **Low-octave drive and frequency extension will be like nothing you've heard from cables using any metal-type, at any price.**

PRECISION MATCHED IMPEDANCE (PMZ) PROCESS

Gamma and Theta Series cables feature an extrusion method that tightens the tolerances of the conductor surface, dielectric extrusion, and the precision of the braided shield. *All are held to minute variances compared to normal extrusion methods* (as pictured above). To achieve these tight tolerances, the extrusion and braiding machines must be run at one-quarter speed during the manufacturing process.

THE ULTIMATE IN VALUE!

Before spending a penny more on over-dressed, over-priced, under-performing signal cables, bring home a system of Gamma Series or Theta Series signal cables. **You will be floored by the difference** these cables make in a system constructed for the ultimate in sound reproduction.

Analog Audio Design TP-1000 Reel-to-Reel Tape Player

Zut Alors!

Jonathan Valin

Well, after admitting that I've overlooked French high-end audio for most of my reviewing career (see my JMF Audio review in the last issue), here I am back in France again—this time in a little commune called Pleumeur-Bodou in the Côtes-d'Armor department of Brittany, just a few kilometers from the English Channel. It was in Pleumeur-Bodou that Christophe Martinez—an engineer who'd spent 25 years developing flight-simulator electronics before going to work for Mulann RTM, a huge French conglomerate that, among many other things, manufactures magnetic recording tape—devoted four years of his life to designing and building the brand-new Analog Audio Design TP-1000 two-track, quarter-inch, 15ips/7½ips, reel-to-reel tape deck that I'm about to review.

Why would Christophe (or anyone, for that matter) spend almost half a decade engineering a brand-new reel-to-reel tape player in today's (mostly) digital-audio world? According to Dave Denyer's 2021 interview with Martinez in *The Reel-to-Reel Rambler* (a terrific site, BTW), the answer is sheer sonic delight: "I discovered the joys of analog sound while working at Mulann. During my time there I participated in the industrialization of the Kerwax Replica, a high-end tube line preamplifier. The Replica was designed at Kerwax Analog Recording Studios in Brittany, France, and was manufactured by Recording The Masters [the subdivision of RPM that makes R2R tape]… During my various visits to Kerwax I had the opportunity to listen to lots of audio tapes, an experience that left me with the conviction that it was absolutely necessary to enable as many people as possible to discover this amazing sound! So, when I left Mulann in 2017 and had some free time, I saw it as an opportunity to challenge myself to design a new tape machine. What excited me was the opportunity to explore how to use today's technology to improve on the already excellent sound quality of tape. [thereeltoreel-rambler.com/2021/12/01/analog-audio-design-now-taking-orders-for-new-tp-1000-tape-deck/]."

After considerable research, Christophe began his work in—where else?—his garage, which he turned into a kind of laboratory wherein he designed and built everything from scratch, except for the DC reel motors (sourced from the Swiss company Maxon), the capstan servo-motor, and the tape heads

Ultra Evolution Speakers

The Culmination of Sonic Obsession.

*"Imaging, dynamics, sexy industrial design, great bass and world-class customer service... **SVS Ultra Evolution speakers deliver in spades!**"*

-Future Audiophile

*"What really took me aback was how **neutral the midrange sounded and how refined the highs were.** Bass was impressively deep, controlled and tight. **A superbly voiced loudspeaker.**"*

-Soundstage

*"**Accurate and immersive.** A mature product from a company that is elevating its game to compete with the high-end offerings of the two-channel world."*

-Stereophile

SVSound.com

(from AM Belgium—the same heads that are in the Studer A800, A810, A812, and A820). On his own, Martinez developed the deck's physical design and layout, the eq and gain electronics, the tape playback and wind/rewind path (including the "strain-gauge" tape-tension sensors that maintain tape tension at 0.5gm and read and correct errors in less than a millisecond), and the unique, built-in, multi-function touchscreen that is rather like the brain of the tape deck (more on this in a moment).

As is the case with virtually every consumer deck I know of, the TP-1000 comes with an array of pushbuttons on its front panel for forward, rewind, play, and stop. (It is a playback-only deck, so there is no record button). But, functionally, that's where its resemblance to most present-day competitors ends. The TP-1000 and its touchscreen operating pad are loaded with remarkable convenience features. For example, via a tap on the screen (or the TP-1000's optional remote control), you can activate a REW + Play function that rewinds the tape then starts playback immediately after rewind is completed, with automatic slowing down and stopping just before the end and the beginning of the tape so that the leader doesn't come off the reel and need to be rethreaded. (This is ideal for pre-recorded 15ips tapes that are stored "tails out"—i.e., backwards—as almost all of them are.) Another press on the touchscreen's LOC (Locator) "button" sets markers to which the player can automatically return, allowing you to go directly to favorite tracks just as you would with an LP, CD/SACD, or stream. You can also set rewind speed (three are available), choose equalization (NAB or IEC), adjust input and output levels, set playback fluxivity levels to 320 or 514nWB/m (optimizing playback of certain high-fluxivity Horch House and UltraAnalogue tapes), switch between 15ips and 7½ips playback speeds, change reel size, calculate tape and tape-core diameter, and adjust a slew of other parameters. All this adds up to a level of utility and convenience that makes the TP-1000 one of the most thoughtfully designed tape machines I've come across.

Of course, none of this ergonomic excellence would matter if the TP-1000 didn't sound great, which, I'm happy to report, it does. Like DACs and record players, tape decks share certain sonic qualities that make the type of source they are reproducing instantly recognizable. All tapes and tape machines have these things in common: a smooth, highly lifelike continuity of sound—not just in the soundstaging sense of the words but also in the reproduction of the dynamic/harmonic envelope. In addition, they have a highly musical tonal balance that nearly duplicates the AES' recommendation for loudspeaker voicing (i.e., an extended, somewhat elevated bass and lower midrange and a slightly rolled-off upper midrange and treble, rather as if the bottom half of a Fletcher-Munson loudness-compensation circuit were built into the tape and the deck reproducing it). Indeed, tape decks sound and image rather in the same way that MBL's superb omnipole flagships, the 101 X-Treme MKIIs, and certain select dipoles do—they don't break things down into microphonically isolate parts but rather pull them together into almost-visible, fully three-dimensional, sonically "complete" wholes within a large, seamless ambient soundfield. While LPs share this holistic presentation, they typically aren't as continuous, dimensional, and easy-on-the-ears as really good tapes are (unless you're using a DS Audio optical cartridge).

Where tape decks chiefly differ one from another is in overall neutrality, density of timbre, resolution of musical and performance detail, transient speed, dynamic range, duration (or PRaT), and susceptibility to noise (both physical and electrical). Like every deck I've reviewed, the TP-1000 has its own set of nuances. In balance, it is on the bottom-up side of neutral (which I prefer), which is to say it is slightly dark sounding; in bass and midrange timbre, it is uniformly dense and rich in color; in the treble, it is edgelessly soft, sweet, and a bit rolled-off without wholly sacrificing lifelike sparkle and detail; in resolution (by which I mean its ability to separate holistic images within ensembles), it is superb; its transient speed and dynamic range are also very good; it handles durations realistically, without accenting attack, steady-state tone, or decay, making for steady, foot-tapping musical pace; and thanks, one supposes, to its sophisticated, strain-gauge-regulated tape path it is dead quiet and uncommonly fluid from start to finish (where certain other machines can be a bit noisy and hurky-jerky, slightly slowing down or accelerating tape speed with consequent deleterious effects on pitch).

What do these strengths and nuances add up to in playback? Let me give you some examples.

Back in 1968, I heard Janis Joplin and Big Brother & The Holding Company sing in a superb venue, Cincinnati's (then-undoctored) Music Hall. It was one of the two most thrilling pop concerts I've attended in a lifetime of concert-going. (The other was Sinatra and his big band at the same venue in the early 1990s.) Unfortunately, Columbia's initial LP release of *Cheap Thrills* (the songs that Janis and her band performed on the night I heard them) left a good deal to be desired sonically. Happily, thanks to

ACOUSTIC SIGNATURE

FUTURE CLASSIC!

VERONA NEO

www.acoustic-signature.com

+1 (888) 2796765 for North America only

15 YEARS WARRANTY

Absolute Analog Analog Audio Design TP-1000 Reel-to-Reel Tape Player

Specs & Pricing

Electrical

Power supply: IEC 3-pole connector
Voltage range: 90 to 264 VAC
Line frequency: 47 to 63Hz
Input 1: XLR, level selectable; balanced: +4dBu (in CAL), unbalanced: –10dBV (in CAL)
Input 2: XLR (powered 48V), level selectable: -60dBV (in CAL), –40dBV (in CAL)
Output: XLR, level selectable: balanced: +4dBu (in CAL), unbalanced: -10dBV (in CAL)
Headphone output:1.5W maximum (8-ohm load)
Ethernet: RJ45 10/100Base-T for remote control and firmware update
IR **input:** Infrared remote control

Audio

Equalization: NAB or IEC, switchable
Reproduce record level: 320nWb/m or 514nWb/m, switchable
Frequency response: 15ips = 30Hz to 22kHz (±2dB) at 0 VU, 7.5 ips = 30Hz to 20kHz (±2dB) at 0 VU
SNR ratio: (THD-N, in CAL)/A-Weighting/15ips = 71dB/78dB, 7.5ips = 70dB/77dB
Distortion: <0.8% at 1kHz/15ips
Channel crosstalk: >60dB

Mechanical

Tape: 1/4 inch (6.35mm)
Track format: 2-track. 2-channel (DIN 0.106 inch, 2.7mm)
Max. reel size: 11.8 inch (30 cm)
Tape speed: Switchable 15ips (38.1cm/s) and 7.5ips (19.05cm/s)
Tape speed accuracy: Within +/- 0.05%
Pitch control range: +/-100%, resolution of 0.01ips
Wow and flutter: 15ips = <0.045% peak, weighted (DIN 45507); 7.5ips = <0.09% peak, weighted (DIN 45507)
Wind speed: switchable 2m/s, 6m/s,10m/s
Wind speed control: 1m/s to 12m/s, resolution of 1m/s
Capstan motor: DC servo motor, belt-drive
Reel motor: 2x DC motor, belt-drive
Dimensions: 466mm x 519mm x 305mm
Weight: 61.73 lbs. (28 kg)
Price: $27,000

ANALOG AUDIO DESIGN
48 Bis Route de Trébeurden
22560 Pleumeur-Bodou, France
analogaudiodesign.com
+33 6 64 93 83 84

PRO AUDIO LTD. (U.S. Distributor)
proaudio@comcast.net
(847) 526-1660

JV's Reference System

Loudspeakers: MBL 101 X-Treme MKII, Magico S3 2023, Magnepan 1.7 and 30.7
Subwoofers: JL Audio Gotham (pair), Magico S Sub (pair)
Linestage preamps: Soulution 727, MBL 6010 D, Siltech SAGA System C1
Phonostage preamps: Soulution 757, DS Audio Grand Master EQ
Power amplifiers: Soulution 711, MBL 9008 A, Siltech SAGA System V1/P1, Odyssey Audio Stratos
Analog source: Clearaudio Master Innovation, Acoustic Signature Invictus Neo/T-9000 Neo, TW Acustic Black Knight/TW Raven 10.5
Tape deck: United Home Audio Ultima Apollo, Metaxas & Sins Tourbillon, Analog Audio Design TP-1000
Phono cartridges: DS Audio Grand Master EX, DS Audio Grand Master, DS Audio DS-W3, Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement v2.1, Air Tight Opus 1, Ortofon MC Anna, Ortofon MC A90
Digital source: MSB Reference DAC, Soulution 760, Berkeley Alpha DAC 2, Kallista Dream Play XC
Cable and interconnect: Synergistic Research Galileo SRX (2023), Crystal Cable Art Series da Vinci, Crystal Cable Ultimate Dream
Power cords: Crystal Cable Art Series da Vinci, Crystal Cable Ultimate Dream, Synergistic Research Galileo SRX 2023
Power conditioner: AudioQuest Niagara 5000 (two), Synergistic Research Galileo SX
Support systems: Critical Mass Systems MAXXUM and QXK equipment racks and amp stands
Room Treatments: Synergistic Research Vibratron SX, Stein Music H2 Harmonizer system, Synergistic Research UEF Acoustic Panels/Atmosphere XL4/UEF Acoustic Dot system, Shakti Hallographs (6), Zanden Acoustic panels, A/V Room Services Metu acoustic panels and traps, ASC Tube Traps
Accessories: DS Audio ES-001, DS Audio ION-001, SteinMusic Pi Carbon Signature record mat, Symposium Isis and Ultra equipment platforms, Symposium Rollerblocks and Fat Padz, Clearaudio Double Matrix Professional Sonic record cleaner

my good buddy and tape maven Greg Beron (whose new UHA Apollo is, IMO, the best-by-far Ultima deck he's built [review forthcoming]), I have a dub of the mastertape from which the LP was made—and, as is often the case with good tape transfers, it is revelatory.

Where the LP was coarse, thin, grainy, and bass-shy, the tape is gloriously rich, full, and powerful. Each instrument (and the sometimes clumsy fingers and hands playing them) is presented as a three-dimensional whole within an ensemble of other holistic, three-dimensional instruments rather than as a collection of microphonically accentuated parts (a screechy starting transient here, a brief, thinned-down flicker of timbre there, a potted-in echo in the background), with considerably more power, extension, indi-

THE $10K TUBE PHONOSTAGE FOR 1/3 THE PRICE

"WITHOUT A DOUBT, A SONIC MASTERPIECE!"

- DICK OLSHER, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND

EVO 100 TUBE PHONOSTAGE

• ALL-TUBE DUAL MONO DESIGN • NO FETs, NO CHIPS

• 5AR4 TUBE RECTIFICATION AND EL34 FILTRATION • POINT-TO-POINT WIRING

PrimaLuna®

LEARN MORE | PRIMALUNA-USA.COM

WATCH THE VIDEO!

DISTRIBUTED IN THE AMERICAS BY HARMONIA DISTRIBUTION | HARMONIADISTRIBUTION.COM

viduation, and clarity in the bass range than you got on the LP. (The tape is also revealing in a more mundane sense—through the TP-1000 it is quite clear why Joplin was dissatisfied with Big Brother, whose ensemble is often ragged and whose playing, particularly James Gurley's guitar and Dave Getz's drums, somewhat sloppy).

Was the tape identical to that long-ago concert? Well, it certainly thrilled me (and not cheaply) in the same way that the concert did, but, no, the sound wasn't identical. The differences in acoustics, mics, performance, listening distance were plain, even 50 years later. But where the tape and concert *were* alike was in what Mercury Records used to call "living presence." The concert was, of course, the thing itself, but thanks to what I've called completeness and continuousness—the two qualities which help create the aural and visual impression that you're listening to and nearly seeing actual musicians playing actual instruments in an actual concert hall or studio, rather than just playing back a recording—the *Cheap Thrills* tape and the TP-1000 came close to delivering a convincing sense of "being there" (albeit a different "there" than Cincinnati's Music Hall in 1968). This lifelike presence is the magic of tape (and of analog, in general).

I wasn't surprised by the improvement in the bass on *Cheap Thrills*. The deck's outstanding bass range was the first thing I noted about the TP-1000. That said, and in spite of tape's inherently rich, inherently elevated low end, some tape players (just like some phonographs and DACs) can sound a bit reticent in the *very* bottom octaves. The TP-1000 is not one of these. Through it, you will get true 30Hz extension on tapes that have 30Hz notes—and on exceptionally deep-reaching instruments, you'll hear pitches (or air movements) even lower that that.

For example, I listened to Volker Lange's new Horch House R2R release of the Swiss band Yello's 1985 synth-pop hit album *Stella*. Today, synth-pop groups can be found everywhere; this wasn't the case in '85, when Yello was one of the pioneers of electronica (and sampling). Though not as powerfully deep-reaching as the scary, through-the-floor, room-shaking, sub-20Hz bottom end of, say, Drake's "Hold On, We're Going Home" from *Nothing Was the Same* [Young Money/Cash Money], Boris Blank's ARP Odyssey synthesizer and Linn M-1 and Oberheim DMX drum machines on "Oh Yeah" and other cuts go plenty low, making for a rip-tide bottom end that veers very near the 20–30Hz octave.

The same held true for the big 40Hz bass drum, harp, brasses, and massed double basses on Chabrier's *España* from Chasing The Dragon's R2R tape *España*. Though the Dragon live-performance recording is about as far from the studio-built Yello album as you can get (and the Dragon's National Symphony Orchestra isn't the London Symphony under Argenta at Kingsway Hall), both albums were recorded, mastered, and mixed entirely analog, and both sound terrific. (I've read where Yello's Boris Blank intended to have *Stella* mixed and mastered digitally, but after hearing what digital processing did to the sound, he canceled the sessions. Even though Yello's instruments were almost entirely electronic, Blank thought the lifeless "perfection" of digital mixing and mastering made the songs "lose their soul.")

In the midrange, as in the bass, the TP-1000 is capable of conjuring almost-visible semblances of musicians like mezzo-soprano Rosie Middleton, who sings the "Habanera" and "The Gypsy Song" from Bizet's *Carmen* on Chasing the Dragon's *España* tape. (Though Middleton is no Victoria de Los Ángeles and conductor Debbie Wiseman no Sir Thomas Beecham, both do an adequate job—and the sound they make, minus an occasional bit of room boom on the bass drum, is superb.) Ditto for Janis' incomparable, husky, explosive mezzo on *Cheap Thrills* or Dieter Meier's amusingly processed basso on "Oh Yeah."

In the treble, the TP-1000 (like all tape decks) is, as noted, beguilingly soft and sweet—far more consistently *gemütlich* than the top ends of CD/SACDs, digital streams, or typical LPs. Indeed, the common reviewer complaint that the treble is too bright on today's recordings (due to close miking and hot tweeters) can be almost wholly ameliorated by listening to tape on a machine like the TP-1000. Cymbals, bells, piccolos, upper-octave violins, etc. are far more listenable (e.g., the harp, strings, and winds on *España* or the ride and crash cymbals on *Cheap Thrills*) without loss of color or shimmer.

Bottom line? This is a wonderful tape deck—outstandingly convenient, beautifully made, and both highly musical and highly realistic sounding on well-recorded R2R tapes. As today's newly designed and completely refurbished tape decks go, it is also a sensational bargain. At $27,000, the TP-1000 isn't cheap, but it's a whole lot less than the decks it competes with (and outdoes when it comes to useful features). Obviously, it gets my highest recommendation. If you haven't tried a reel-to-reel tape deck yet (and you can afford the entry fee and considerable ongoing cost of 15ips tapes), this is one you shouldn't pass by if the absolute sound at a more affordable price is your goal. tas

Materially Superior, Award-Winning
Turntables and Tonearms
stereophile
RECOMMENDED
COMPONENT
CLASS A+2023
www.JSikora.eu
US Dealer Inquiries: jeff@NotableAudio.com
International Distributor Inquiries: info@JSikora.eu
JSikora

The Voice That Is
acoustical systems
www.thevoicethatis.com
610.359.0189
A*Stellar.
Acoustical Systems' ultimate turntable ....
reduced to the absolute maximum performance
(shown with Axiom 12" tonearms and AS Cartridges)

Dutch & Dutch 8c Loudspeaker with u-BACCH

The Future Is Now

Andrew Quint

Traditionally, buying a speaker is like buying a sweater. In the case of the sweater, you pick a style you like, and your only subsequent decisions involve size and color. With loudspeakers, it's been much the same. Within your budget, you identify a sonic character that appeals to you and then determine the model in a manufacturer's range appropriate for your room and choose a finish if, indeed, a choice is offered. Done.

In the not-so-distant future, however, purchasing a loudspeaker may be more like purchasing a computer. When you order a new laptop, you settle on a base model and then choose "options"—how fast a processor to invest in, how much RAM and storage, which graphics card or word-processing program to get. Modern loudspeakers often do much more than simply change an already amplified electrical signal into mechanical energy. Increasingly, the "speaker" may accomplish the amplification itself, convert a digital data source to analog, or accomplish some form of digital signal processing (DSP).

It's the last of those functions that makes the current iteration of the Dutch & Dutch 8c loudspeaker of particular interest: The 8c has long had the capacity for DSP room correction and can now implement acoustical crosstalk cancellation (XTC) with a stripped-down version of Dr. Edgar Choueiri's BACCH filter, the first loudspeaker to license this technology, or any other third-party plug-in, for that matter. Maybe the future is here right now.

Dutch & Dutch—hopefully, it's no surprise to anyone that the company's home is in the Netherlands—was the 2014 offshoot of an engineering firm. Research eventuated in an application that let users analyze an acoustic space and determine the optimal locations for loudspeakers as well as the correct DSP to use in a given setting. A line of pro audio gear was developed, eventually followed by the consumer product known as the 8c; it was first produced in 2018 and is now the only speaker that D&D manufactures. The 8c does exist in two versions, the 8c Studio ($12,950) which, while it can be successfully employed in a home environment, is intended more for audio-engineering professionals. It's the full boat 8c ($14,950 without the BACCH plug-in) that's the subject of this review.

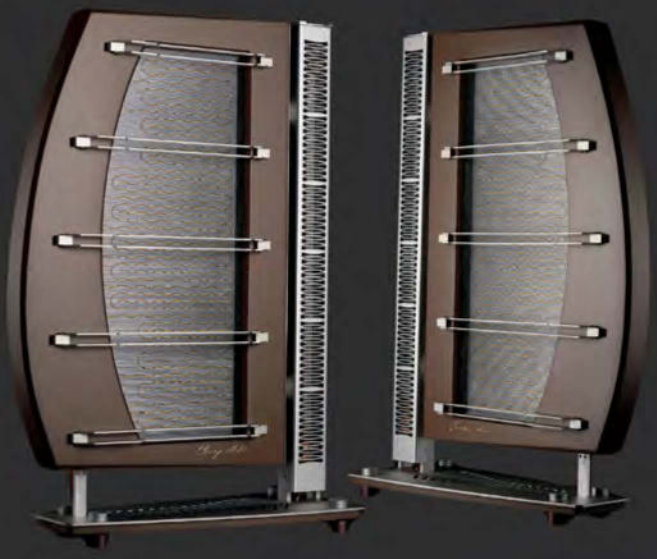
Both versions can be considered "monitors," but they are anything but "mini." The speaker measures 10.5" x 19" x 15" and weighs in at a substantial 57 pounds. The top and side panels are 19mm solid oak. (The 8c Studio uses MDF, but the company literature states that the two versions of the speaker sound the same. I'm skeptical of that claim, though I haven't heard the less expensive model, so I ought to keep quiet on the issue.) The internal construction employs 18mm birch plywood. The bright white front baffle is an injection molded composite material called ABS which, for those of you who aren't organic chemists, is acrylonitrile butadiene styrene, an "opaque thermoplastic" that's exceptionally rigid, strong, and resistant to chemical degradation. I happen to think it looks cool, but others may register a Not-In-My-Living-Room response. An indicator light located within a small square cut out of the front baffle where the Dutch & Dutch logo resides lets you know that the 8c is powered up and ready to play music.

I happen to think it looks cool, but others may register a Not-In-My-Living-Room response.

The D&D 8c has four drivers, manufactured by SEAS and Wavecor. These include a 1" aluminum/magnesium alloy dome tweeter, an 8" aluminum midrange cone, and a pair of rear-firing 8" aluminum woofers. In front, the plastic baffle has been shaped to create an el-

LUXURY HIFI

WWW.LUXURYHIFIDISTRIBUTION.COM



OUR BRANDS

CLARISYS AUDIO – TOBIAN SOUND SYSTEMS – SIGNAL PROJECTS

BLOCK AUDIO

Dealer Inquiries Welcome!

941-259-6000

info@luxuryhifidistribution.com

egant-appearing waveguide for the high-frequency driver. The sides of the 8c feature vertically oriented vents that result in a "quasi-cardioid" dispersion for the front-facing midwoofer that attenuates its low frequency output to the rear. This, in addition to making the 8c a fairly directional speaker, allows it to be placed quite close to the wall behind them, as close as 4 inches. There's an increase in LF extension and articulation due to what Dutch & Dutch calls "Boundary Coupled Bass"—without mucking up the mid to upper bass and lower midrange.

Examining the D&D's rear panel immediately clues one in to how different the 8c is from most loudspeakers. There's an IEC receptacle for the supplied AC power cord and a rocker switch to turn the speaker on. An RJ45 port for attaching a Cat6 Ethernet cable is the preferred way to get signal into the speaker from your home network. There's also an XLR input for connecting either a balanced analog cable (say, for a turntable, analog tuner, or CD player) or an AES/EBU digital wire that supports PCM up to 24-bit/192kHz. A small button allows the user to switch the XLR input from digital to analog mode and to change the gain level for the latter; a vertically oriented series of orange lights indicate the current status of the XLR input. There are two XLR outputs, one to send signal to a powered subwoofer, the other to "daisy chain" a second 8c (or a third or a fourth).

Inside are three switching amplifiers, one each for the tweeter (250W), the midwoofer (250W), and the rear-facing woofers (500W), all sourced from the Danish firm Pascal. The crossover topologies are fourth-order Linkwitz-Riley, with the hand-off frequencies specified as 100Hz and 1.25kHz. The 8c's employ a hybrid cooling system that includes a fan operating on an as-needed basis. I could hear the fan starting up if standing next to the speaker but never from the listening position.

The 8cs are designed for placement on stands, and Bill Chi, D & D's North American distributor, provided a pair of Sound Anchor Compact ADJs. Sound Anchor produces many stand models for specific loudspeakers, but Dutch & Dutch isn't one of them, and the top plate on which the 8c sits is slightly smaller than the base of the speaker. I doubt this is of any sonic consequence but will cause some distress to those with OCD tendencies in their psychic make-up. (I know someone like that.) Ahead of delivery, Chi had inquired about the dimensions of my room and also asked for the height of my ears above the floor as I sat at the optimal listening position. The answer was 32 inches. The SA stands are adjustable, so I set their height to 24", which got the 8c's tweeter to ear height, which I assumed was desirable. I was wrong. Bill Chi had me change the stand height to 27", which placed my ears at a height midway between the tweeter and the midrange driver, and the 8c's definitely sounded better that way. I used the urethane-coated Sorbothane "Black & Blue Dots" provided by Sound Anchor to couple the loudspeakers to the stands.

Mostly, the many worthy electronic and source components in my reference system lay cold and quiet, and no fancy cables saw service.

Apart from the adjustment to the stand height, moving the loudspeakers closer to the room's front wall (I ended up with the D&Ds 11 inches from the shelving and diffusors behind them), and toeing them in towards the prime listening location, I did not spend hours or days making micro-adjustments to the 8c's position to get things just so—a goal that, as audiophiles, we all know is often never reached. Bill (in Texas) was joined by Dutch & Dutch co-founder and designer Martijn Mensink (in Holland) to remotely tackle the always formidable task of getting a loudspeaker to function at its best in a domestic space. Dutch & Dutch approaches this challenge not by pushing a speaker this way and that in millimeter increments but instead by employing some of the most sophisticated DSP tools available in the audio industry. (See sidebar on p.86.)

Now would be a good time to introduce D&D's Ascend app.

Ascend is available as either a web-based application or a native app downloadable from Google or Apple. It serves as a tool to operate the 8c's on a day-to-day basis but also to facilitate setup. One uses a measurement microphone (UMIK, OmniMic,

NEXT GEN POWER

NEW

PLATINUM ELECTRA® OCC®-7N Solid Silver
SILVER ELECTRA® OCC®-7N Silver-clad Copper
ELECTRA® OCC®-7N Copper
AURORA® Silver-plated Oxygen-Free Copper
STRATUS® Oxygen-Free Copper

a David Salz innovation

Other cables filter your music.
Wireworld cables let the most music through.

Technology that channels musical expression.

© 2024 Wireworld, Inc.

www.wireworldcable.com

WIREWORLD®
CABLE TECHNOLOGY
Engineered for Reality™

etc.) along with some free software (Room EQ Wizard is recommended) and D&D's proprietary RoomMatching program to identify and correct room anomalies. Chi and Mensink created three RoomMatching profiles for me to choose among. All three showed off the product's merits well, but one did manifest superior transparency and LF control, and I selected it for most of my listening. Complaints? Setting volume on the app involved a circular motion with one finger that could be a bit fussy in its operation. For most of my time with the 8c's, I adjusted the volume with Roon, which entails moving a slider right or left.

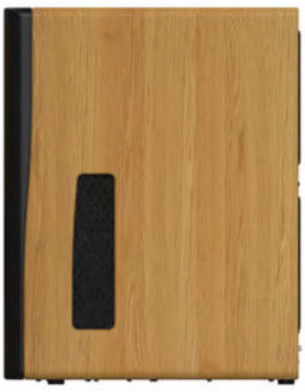
Unlike most other loudspeaker reviews that will (or should) include a list of associated gear, in this case there just isn't much to report. For setup, I installed the UMIK and Room EQ Wizard software on my Baetis Reference server, which is where my Roon Server lives, and streamed content from Qobuz and local files from my NAS. Each 8c needs an Ethernet connection to your network and, for convenience, I placed a Netgear gigabit Ethernet switch on the floor between the speakers and connected it to each of the 8c's with modest computer-store-quality Cat6 cables. The Netgear device was connected to my main 8-port Fidelizer switch that, in turn, is hard-wired to my home's modem, located in another room. Occasionally, I did utilize the 8c's XLR inputs for analog sources—changing the input from the network connection to XLR is easily done with the Ascend app—either a turntable or my BACCH-SP processor (see below). But, mostly, the many worthy electronic and source components in my reference system lay cold and quiet, and no fancy cables saw service.

Even without the BACCH filter, the D&D 8c displayed a refined versatility, serving well the most profound musical expression of despair, faith, and romantic longing (Shostakovich's Symphony No. 4, Bach's *St. Matthew Passion,* Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*), as well as less serious considerations of the human condition that the best country music can provide. With "One More Last Chance," I love Vince Gill's earnest cluelessness as he acknowledges that his days of marital bliss could be numbered and involve physical harm in the very near future. ("She was standing at the front door/when I got home last night./The Good Book was in her left hand/and a rolling pin in her right.") The 8c's did not disappoint, delivering the joyous defiance of Gill's vocal and all the manic energy of the propulsive, twangy, jaw-droppingly virtuosic arrangement as effectively as I've ever heard it. I listened to the song four times in a row and then, for good measure, the version by Gary Nicholson, who co-wrote the song with Gill.

There is a slight softness to the treble that is not unwelcome with most recordings of massed strings; certainly, I wouldn't characterize the top end as dull. Dynamics are dialed back a little, at least as compared to speakers that some find aggressive, and this does have the effect of making the 8c's very "listenable." There's plenty of quality bass for all musical styles, even pipe organ and pop with a synthesized bottom octave. Tonally, the 8c's represent voices and instruments idiomatically without unnatural colorization or alterations to the light/dark continuum. Imaging is specific without exaggeration.

By mid-2023, the Dutch & Dutch 8c, by nature always a work-in-progress, had evolved to a point where it offered a performance level that reflected both its pro-audio heritage and an audiophile sensibility. Given D&D's long-standing interest in spatiality, it made perfect sense that it would license the BACCH crosstalk cancellation filter as a software option for the 8c. The radiation characteristics of the speaker made it a promising candidate for XTC. For more information about the technology and sonic character of BACCH—Band-Associated Cross Cancellation Hierarchy; even BACCH Labs, the owner of dozens of the relevant patents, doesn't bother much with the official wordy/nerdy designation—see my review of the Theoretica Applied Physics BACCH-SP adio in TAS 333, Tom Martin's lucid video evaluating the stand-alone BACCH4Mac software on TAS's YouTube channel and, especially, the essay on spatial music published in our February 2024 issue, written jointly by Dr. Choueiri and the well-known performance artist Laurie Anderson.

Usually, BACCH users will create an XTC filter unique to their room and hearing by inserting small microphones into the ear canals and measuring the response to full-range frequency sweeps. D&D instead offers the most basic version of the BACCH filter, known as u-BACCH ("universal BACCH"), an implementation of Choueiri's XTC algorithm that doesn't require any information about a specific room or listener, or any acoustic analysis—just a physical measurement of the triangle formed by the two loudspeakers and listener. The additional cost of the installed filter for an 8c purchaser is $1100, about $100 more than what BACCH Labs charges for u-BACCH in their online store.



If maracas and back-up vocals over your shoulder is what you're after, you should probably stick with discrete multichannel or an object-based format such as Dolby Atmos.

The BACCH filter potentially reveals a number of spatial attributes present in the original recording. The first is what Dr. Choueiri calls *envelopment,* with instrumental and vocal images located well out into the room, occasionally even behind the listening position. This phenomenon does impress enthusiasts at audio shows but "surround sound" isn't something that XTC should be expected to routinely create. If mara-

SIX U.S. LOCATIONS

BROOKLYN, NY / Bob Visintainer 917-363-7423

CALIFORNIA / David Hyman 917-837-2559

PORTLAND, OR / Bob Vineyard 503-867-6755

CHICAGO, IL / Jerry Barker 312-956-2938

WEST PALM BEACH, FL / Jakub Paszynin 610-633-8166

MANHATTAN, NY / Bob Visintainer 917-363-7423

ALSYVOX • AURENDER • DIESIS • BAYZ • MAGICO M9 DALLAS • ODEON • RAIDHO
PILIUM • KONDO • TAIKO • ESOTERIC • CONSTELLATION
VYDA • NORDOST • DEVIALET • VAC (Brooklyn/Chicago) • VYGER • TELLURIUM

Specs & Pricing

Type: Three-way powered loudspeaker
Driver complement: 1" aluminum/magnesium alloy dome tweeter, 8" aluminum cone midrange, 2x 8" aluminum cone woofers
Crossovers: Fourth-order Linkwitz-Riley, 100Hz and 1.25kHz
Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz
Inputs: Analog: balanced audio over XLR, digital: AES3 over XLR
Output: Analog: XLR for active subwoofer; digital: AES3 thru over XLR
Networking: Ethernet over RJ45
Dimensions: 10.5" x 19" x 15"
Weight: 57 lbs. each
Price: $14,950 (additional $1100 for u-BACCH plug-in)

DUTCH & DUTCH
Sonarstraat 10
2901 AX
Capelle aan den IJssel, Rotterdam
dutchdutch.com

North American Distributor (Bill Chi)
Dutch & Dutch NA
4653 Nall Rd.
Dallas, TX 75244

cas and back-up vocals over your shoulder is what you're after, you should probably stick with discrete multichannel or an object-based format such as Dolby Atmos. Another spatial metric is *proximity* and here, too, it's attention-grabbing when a stereo pair of loudspeakers can create the illusion of someone whispering in your ear. Of much more musical consequence, though, is what Choueiri labels *extent of resolution,* a "perception that the sound occupies a three-dimensional volume." The first two kinds of spatiality are not unimportant reality triggers but are very dependent on the technique of the original recording, the dispersion pattern of the loudspeakers used for playback, and room factors. The third, however, is in play with most of the millions of stereo recordings made over the last 70 years. And while it's true that c-BACCH—the "c" is for "custom"—is superior to u-BACCH, I was surprised to observe that the improvement heard moving from no-BACCH to u-BACCH was substantially greater than u-BACCH to c-BACCH. To my ears, at least when it comes to "extent of resolution," in most rooms for most listeners, you're getting 80% of what c-BACCH is capable of delivering.

How about some examples of what u-BACCH can do? An orchestral woodwind section always sits in two rows—flutes and oboes in front, clarinets and bassoons behind them. The opening movement of my perennial symphonic reference recording, a 2010 live performance of the Shostakovich Symphony No. 15 by the Concertgebouw directed by Bernard Haitink, begins with a lengthy flute solo that, after 35 bars, is taken over by the principal bassoon. With BACCH, you can tell that the bassoonist is sitting a few feet behind his colleague—just as you could from a distance at a concert. Also, some pop/rock productions can have so much going on at once that the musical presentation becomes amorphous. In 2017, the Canadian band Bare Naked Ladies released an album of some of their older material recorded with the then-current six members of the Persuasions. The vocal arrangements—the Persuasions were, of course, originally an *a cappella* group—could be obscured by the rock underpinnings, as with the opening selection, "The Old Apartment." With u-BACCH activated, I could better appreciate both the alt-rock quartet's punchy drive and the rich harmonizations of the gospel-inspired sextet that coexist in this inspired collaboration.

I was initially puzzled as to why the BACCH filter couldn't be utilized when the 8c's were run via their analog XLR inputs. With either a Theoretica Applied Physics processor (the BACCH SP adio in my case) or freestanding software from BACCH Labs, one can enjoy the benefits of crosstalk cancellation on input from a turntable, analog tape deck, or CD player, as well as streamed material. Martijn Mensink explained: "The BACCH algorithm requires both right and left channels. When we stream, the stereo content is known by both 8c's, and we can run the BACCH algorithm. When we use the analog XLR input, one channel doesn't know the content of the other channel and thus BACCH does not work." However, Mensink acknowledged that a *digital* signal coming through the XLR input could carry both channels via an SPDIF or AES/EBU interface. In fact, some D&D owners have been clamoring for this capability and, says Mensink, "We've started developing it."

Additionally, more plug-ins for the 8c are in the works. "We're currently focusing on supporting more streaming services. Besides that, we're working on integration with gear from other manufacturers (think music servers and streamers) as well as audiophile media players," Mensink told me. "We are also in early talks with parties that make room-correction software. RoomMatching as a part of today's 8c works really well, but we're open to the idea of using the Dutch & Dutch platform for other approaches."

Beyond its innovative design principles and audio quality, the Dutch & Dutch 8c should also attract attention as an exceptional value. If the comparison is with other $15k loudspeakers, the D&Ds do more than OK, delivering full-range, uncolored sound in a relatively small package. But, of course, you're getting more than just speakers for your 15 large—you're getting amplification, D-to-A conversion, and DSP room correction for that price. Add in the cost of a good pair of stands, a decent server, plus the u-BACCH option and the whole shebang still comes in at around $20,000. If the future of high-end audio is about fewer boxes and the implementation of advanced software, that's great. If there's an associated reduction of the price of admission to the realm of world-class sound, that's downright revolutionary.

HARMONIA DISTRIBUTION

WE PLACE PRODUCTS FROM THE WORLD'S LEADING AUDIO BRANDS WITH THE MOST KNOWLEDGEABLE AND WELCOMING RETAILERS IN THE COUNTRY.

WE BACK THIS UP WITH DEDICATED SALES AND SUPPORT TEAMS.

WE PROUDLY REPRESENT:

PrimaLuna®

FYNE AUDIO

PATHOS

booster
The audiophile power supply solution

Cabasse

KISEKI

HARMONIADISTRIBUTION.COM | INFO@HARMONIADISTRIBUTION.COM | 909.931.0219

Martijn Mensink

Dutch & Dutch co-founder Martijn Mensink on software development, speaker radiation patterns, Class D amplification, fans, and the company name.

Apart from the recent availability of the u-BACCH plug-in, how has the 8c evolved over the years, in terms of both hardware and software?

Over the years, like many manufacturers, we've consistently pursued incremental improvements. These are primarily focusing on improvements in manufacturability, supply-chain flexibility, and serviceability. However, with the exception of a small update that increased the maximum sample rate of the digital input from 96k to 192k back in 2020, the hardware of an 8c bought today remains essentiallyidentical to one acquired in 2018.The real evolution lies in software.

Dutch & Dutch operates as a small team of approximately 12 individuals, with a third of them dedicated to software development. We are currently working on expanding our portfolio, but the bulk of our software development remains focused on advancing the capabilities of the 8c.

Initially, the 8c's featured a rudimentary web-based user interface, primarily for basic RoomMatching setup—adjusting boundary distances, basic equalization, volume control, and input switching. Since then, we've poured substantial resources into enhancing the platform.

Key developments include:

- Introduction of a new user interface, available both natively and via web-access (Ascend).
- Implementation of a robust system for seamless over-the-air distribution and management of software updates (Release Management System).
- Integration of Room EQ Wizard (REW) to enhance and simplify RoomMatching.
- Attainment of Roon Ready certification.
- Integration with Spotify Connect.

Thanks to these ongoing software enhancements, customers who invested in a pair of 8c's back in 2018 have witnessed a continuous improvement in their product's performance and capabilities over time.There are a lot of interesting new developments in the pipeline.

The measurement software needed to accomplish room correction is available to anyone for free. With the review pair, you and Bill Chi used the measurements remotely to make DSP adjustments. Is this something Dutch & Dutch will do for a consumer?

Certainly. RoomEQ is the final step in our RoomMatching process, and it is crucial for getting exceptional sound in any room setting. When you invest in a pair of 8c's, this service will be offered either through your dealer, distributor, or directly by us.

At Dutch & Dutch, we believe that your listening experience hinges on the interplay between your loudspeakers and your room's acoustics. This belief has driven the development of the RoomMatching technology suite, which ensures that the 8c's seamlessly adapt to the acoustics of your listening environment.

Conventional speakers often clash with the room acoustics. This can lead to problems such as boomy bass, shouty mids, masking of details, and listening fatigue (particularly at higher levels). The 8c's, in contrast, aim to complement the room acoustics. You can get great sound, even if the acoustics of your room are less than perfect.

For instance, with conventional speakers, it can be tricky to find the right distance between the speaker and the wall behind it. Depending on the exact distance, at some frequencies the wall reflection will constructively add to the direct sound, at other frequencies you'll get destructive interference. This leads to unwanted coloration. In contrast, the 8c works together with the wall behind it. The Boundary Coupled Woofers in the back will acoustically couple with the wall behind them, which means that the entire wall effectively becomes a part of the speaker itself.

The result is that the 8c and the wall together radiate a single phase-coherent wavefront, which translates into a subjectively faster, tighter, and punchier low end.

In the midrange and high frequencies, most loudspeakers have a radiation pattern that wildly varies with frequency. The 8c has an acoustic cardioid midrange and a highly optimized waveguide that maintains pretty much the same directivity pattern into the high frequencies. The result is significantly less boundary interference, and less strong room reflections. Yet whatever reflections do occur, strongly resemble the direct sound, which makes it much easier for your brain to process them. That means less listening fatigue.

The D & D features one of very few unequivocal successes with Class D amplification that I've encountered in high-end products. What's been your experience?

In the audiophile world, despite obvious benefits such as greater output and efficiency, Class D amplifiers have a bad rep. And for good reason. Earlier models could sound harsh, or simply not "musical." They had all sorts of misbehavior. Fortunately, Class D technology has come a long way since then. Today, the best Class D amplifiers from leading manufacturers sound as good as their traditional analog counterparts. The high-end hi-fi world is a very conservative place, but gradually Class D modules are finding their way into the offerings of esteemed high-end manufacturers.

In the setting of Class D amplification, I was surprised that the 8c's required fans as well as passive cooling. What's the reason?

Powered speakers with Class D are usually passively cooled. You can do that, because Class D amps are very efficient, and thus not a lot of heat is produced. However, keep in mind that the 8c's have a total of 1000 watts of amplifier power on board, which is there for dynamic headroom. A few percent of 1000 watts is still a lot of heat. Regardless, the amplifiers in the 8c do rely on passive cooling in almost all cases. The fan is there as a backup. It doesn't normally come on unless you're in a warm area. If it does come on, you're unlikely to hear it. It's very quiet, and it starts running at a very low speed. A tiny amount of air flow can make a huge difference.

What's with the name of the company? Yes, you're in Holland but why *two* Dutches?

Good question. The 8c's are designed and manufactured in the Netherlands, but mostly, we just liked the ring of it. tas

B.audio Alpha One Streaming Integrated Amplifier

A Defining Debut

Neil Gader

If the brand B.audio doesn't immediately ring a bell, join the club. I was similarly in the dark. At least until I was approached to review the Alpha One streaming integrated amplifier. To be fair, B.audio is a relative newcomer on the North American high-end scene. Headquartered in eastern France in quaint Saint-Hippolyte, it was founded in 2016 by brothers Cédric and Sébastien Bermann. This review represents the first appearance for this boutique French electronics company in the pages of TAS. However, if the performance that I observed in Alpha One is any guide, TAS readers will be hearing a lot more from B.audio, and soon.

Turning to the Alpha One, it's a fully equipped, medium-powered integrated amp with DAC and B.audio's EX networking module. Scanning B.audio's product list, Alpha One also represents its sole integrated amp in a two-tier lineup that is composed of the One Series and the Reference Series and is peppered with models that include a preamp/DAC (with or without streaming/server capability), stand-alone DACs, and stereo and monoblock amplifiers.

Visually, there's a distinctive purity of line to the facia of the Alpha One—minimalist, purposeful. Along the smooth surfaces of the thick aluminum front panel, classic and contemporary elements converge in equal measure. A discrete LED and and florescent black-and-white screen displays volume, set-up, and configuration options. There are no knobs or rockers. Arrayed along the front panel are six flush-mounted buttons for power, navigating sources, menu activation, and volume. These functions can also be operated via an included custom-made aluminum remote control. The back panel is uncluttered and intelligently laid out.

It's a fully equipped, medium-powered integrated amp with DAC and B.audio's EX networking module.

It houses a pair of RCA analog inputs (one of which can be configured for bypass for home-theater setups), plus an XLR analog in. Digital inputs include USB Data for a thumb drive, AES-EBU, Tos-Link, and SPDIF, and XLR pre outs. And a Network Ethernet RJ45.

The preamp stage of the Alpha One is based on fully symmetrical construction and the wide implementation of surface-mounted components. Paraphrasing B.audio literature, "It operates in a 100% balanced mode and is distinguished by the absence of coupling capacitors. The 100% balanced topology guarantees an absolute immunity to noise sources in analog signal processing. Operating outside the signal path, multi-pole servo-circuits are used to provide a constant continuous reference to the active elements of the circuit, thus insuring the preservation of the audio signal." Volume control is an all-analog affair and operates via a 64-step, relay-driven resistor network, (–80 to +0 dB). The mechanical "click" as each resistor is activated or bypassed will be a satisfying throwback for many audiophiles. Personally, I still like swinging a chunky volume knob, but with today's smart apps/devices and remote controls, that's mostly a thing of the past.

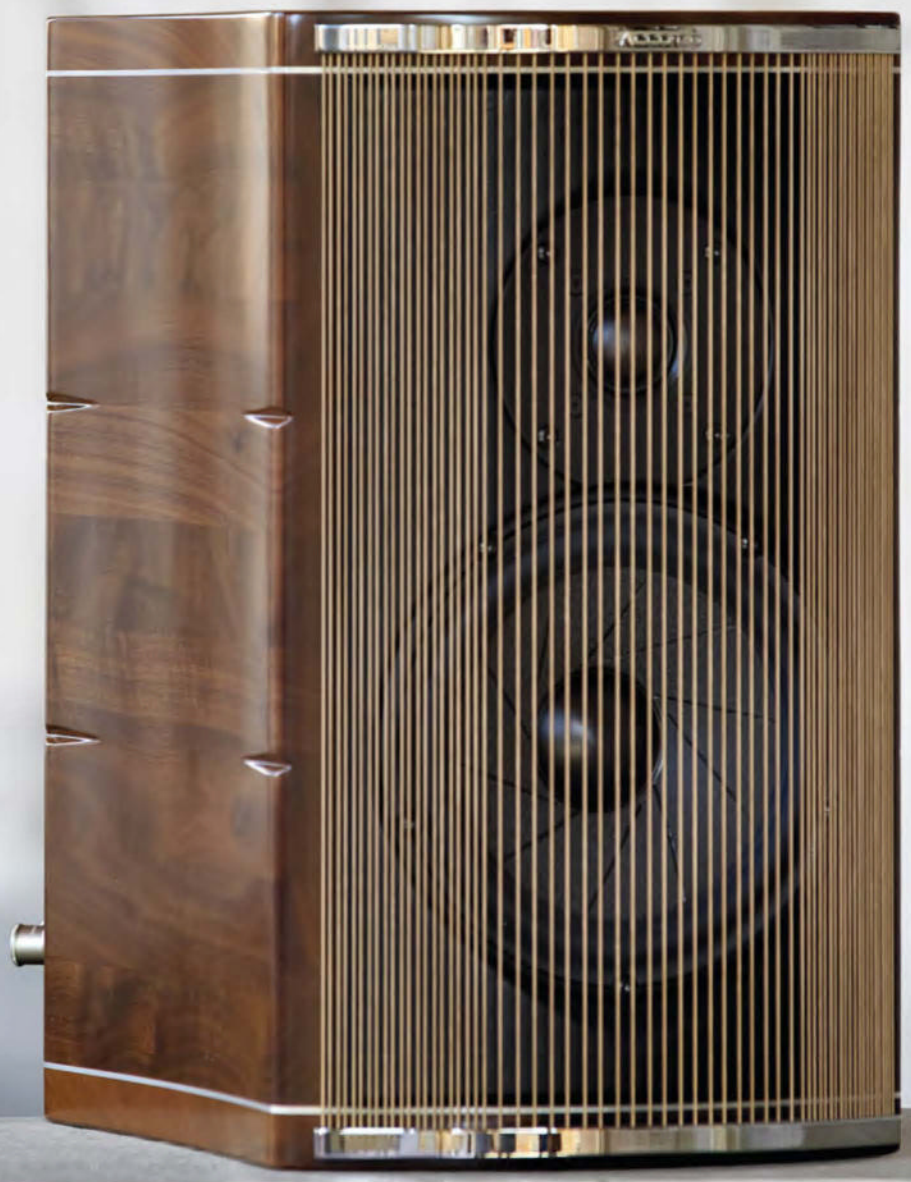
Behind Alpha One's outward simplicity are a wealth of menu-driven settings and a plethora of configuration features visible from the small display. Among them a handy mode which allows automatic source-detection scanning, as well as streamer module activation and configuration, standby delay, variable bypass (home cinema), balance, subsonic filter, and an entire acoustic-correction suite.

The amplifier section is based on B.audio's top-tier Reference power amps. Running two pairs of high-cur-

LOOK MA... NO STANDS!

MEET THE NEW FRANCO SERBLIN ACCORDO GOLDBERG BOOK SHELF SPEAKER

Like a Stradivarius, each Franco Serblin speaker is handcrafted from only the finest hardwoods by a master artisan in Italy. Now with the Accordo Goldberg, you can experience the style and performance of Franco Serblin's visionary design either with stands... *or without*.



FRANCO SERBLIN
francoserblin.it

Visit axissaudio.com or call 866-295-4133 to find an authorized Franco Serblin dealer nearest to you

AXISS AUDIO
axissaudio.com

Specs & Pricing

Power output: 120Wpc into 8 ohms, 200Wpc into 4 ohms
Inputs: Two RCA, one configurable as bypass; one XLR balanced
Outputs: XLR pre-out
D/A conversion: Multibit sigma-delta
Formats: PCM up to 384kHz/DXD/DoP/ native DSD up to DSD 256
Acoustic correction: 64-bit DSP, 8x parametric filters with automatic gain adjustment
Dimensions: 17.7" x 4" x 15.5"
Weight: 34 lbs.
Price: $18,000 Silver or Black (custom colors available at extra cost)

MONARCH SYSTEMS DISTRIBUTION
16 Inverness Place E, Building B
Englewood, CO 80112
(720) 399-0072
monarch-systems.com
b-audio.com

rent bipolar transistors, the passively cooled dual-mono design outputs 120Wpc into 8 ohms (200Wpc into 4 ohms). Together with its high current reserve, Alpha One can drive demanding low-sensitivity loudspeakers with ease. Plus, its in-house refined topology was designed to drastically reduce dynamic distortion. Optimizing the use of local feedback at the most critical stages, it benefits from the advantages of a Class AB output stage, while maintaining excellent linearity of operation. I should note also that it was a cool-running design given the confines of the low-profile chassis.

Setup was straight forward. Although the Alpha One doesn't offer a bespoke control app, it recommends the mconnect HD Player download. mconnect for iOS and Android uses the UPnP protocol and also allows connection to the streaming platforms Qobuz or Tidal. It's also compatible with gapless playback. Alpha One is AirPlay compliant and Roon Ready. It operated smoothly and was easily navigable after a brief period of familiarization. Given that I'm no whiz in the streaming/networking world, if you're "config-averse" like me, be sure to confirm that the streaming service you're subscribing to is properly outputting the highest resolution its capable of. mconnect will only support the resolution it "sees."

Built into Alpha One's 64-bit DSP is an extensive equalizer and speaker/room measurement application. Designed to ameliorate the most noxious issues in room behavior—commonly a treble peak or excessive room gain—the "corrector" features a parametric equalizer with independently configurable filters; high- and low-shelf, peak, notch, bandpass, high- and low-pass. Each filter can be activated or deactivated. However, to carry out the room measurements, a computer is required. B.audio points the user to the REW (roomeqwizard.com) software. Also needed is a USB microphone such as a UMIK MiniDSP (recognized directly by this software) or something similar. Measurements are conducted via a signal sweep of audible frequencies and are sent to your computer. Based on those measurements, the user then selects and fine tunes the appropriate filter in the amp's menu settings. Too much DIY? A simpler alternative is to use the response curve of your loudspeakers as a good starting point for defining the corrections to be used and further refine from there.

Integrated amplifiers have been a focus of mine for years. My systems tend to run smaller and inhabit smaller rooms. Limited space does not favor big racks of separate components, so single chassis "do everything" components have been the norm. I have never felt shortchanged by this arrangement. My current references, the tube/hybrid Aesthetics Mimas and the MBL Cadenza C51, have been mainstays over the years.

Overall, Alpha One found itself in good company with these superb integrated amps. In sonic performance, it was tonally spot-on-neutral, dynamically lively and assertive across the spectrum, with finely focused image clarity. As it is also noise- and grain-free, I felt there was an elevated sense of smoothness and liquidity to the presentation. And a warmth and bloom factor that seemed to cast a pleasing rose complexion onto the music. There was a fidelity to timbre and texture that brought to the fore the physical and harmonic identities of acoustic instruments, especially resonating instruments like guitar, cello, and bass violin. The Alpha One wrings out harmonic detail like water from a sponge.

Alpha One is AirPlay compliant and Roon Ready.

Let me preface the forthcoming remarks with a word about power ratings. Beyond the specified 120Wpc amplifier output, Alpha One also presented an *impression* of power that goes beyond mere numerical ratings. Truthfully, I can't tell 100W from 200W at the drop of a hat—most people can't. But I can tell whether a loudspeaker when pushed hard is playing to its capability or has hit the limits the amp is imposing on it. Have the low frequencies lost

AXIOS
FENIX

INTRODUCING OUR FLAGSHIP IEM CABLE

available in all copper, hybrid(copper & silver), & all silver

KIMBER KABLE®

www.kimber.com - 801-621-5530

grip and control? Is the tweeter singing as it should? These observations illuminate a lot about an amplifier's character—distortion levels, compression issues, and headroom, to name a few. The Alpha One drove my persnickety low-sensitivity ATC compacts with brio and conviction. On large-scale orchestral material like Beethoven's Ninth or Holst's *The Planets* or, for sheer majesty, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Alpha One navigated dynamic episodes from macro to micro and engaged the most complex and musically layered passages like it was on protein supplements. Using kettle drums and bass violins as examples, the delicate balance it captured between low-end grip and pitch accuracy was thrilling in its verisimilitude. It also effortlessly lifted the performance of the AMT tweeter of the Audiovector QR 3SE (review forthcoming) as if on a pillow of air.

Vocals sounded uniformly excellent with the resident rosy bloom and blush that I spoke of earlier. For example, I listened to both the original Springsteen version of "American Skin (41 Shots)" as well as singer/songwriter Jen Chapin's cover (yes, the daughter of the late Harry Chapin). The versions couldn't be more different but no less powerful. It was as if each artist was singing in character, embodying a bereft father and mother—the impassioned fury of the throaty Springsteen vocal versus the quieter resolve and melancholy of Chapin's reading. In both instances, I felt the Alpha One captured not just the music but the raw emotion beneath the singers' voices.

I've realized over the years that I become, perhaps subliminally, a different listener when an amp of high transparency and resolution drives my system. Almost unconsciously, I begin leaning closer to noteworthy acoustic recordings—music that challenges a component's resolution to its limits. One such recording is an oldie, the *All-Star Percussion Ensemble* arranged and conducted by Harold Faberman. Recorded in 1982, this 1992 reissued LP was mastered by the inimitable and sorely missed Doug Sax. Excerpts range from Beethoven to Bizet and Berlioz with Pachelbel's beloved *Canon* tossed in. It's a menagerie of metal and wood and skin percussion instruments ranging from bell tree to glockenspiel, snare, marimba, tympani, wood blocks, and suspended cymbals. Essentially a torture test for transients. With the B.audio in control dynamic swings were vast, transients delicate but crisply pointed, while decays and sustains into the acoustic venue were naturalistic in duration.

Alpha One had an almost uncanny facility at revealing subtle differences in tonal color and contrast between identical recordings released in other formats. The most recent example that I can point to is *Getz/Gilberto*, Impex Records One-Step reissue on 45rpm (reviewed in this issue). As much high-quality digital as I listen to, this Impex reissue was a lesson in how, under certain circumstances, vinyl can reign supreme. I compared the Impex to the version on high-resolution Tidal streaming and the Verve Records CD re-released in the 90s. Same recording, but with the Alpha One in the chain it was no contest between the Impex vinyl and the streaming and CD formats. Density, dimensionality, depth relationships between musicians bloomed across a wider soundstage. And perhaps best of all, the influence of finer micro-gradations and volume interplay were heightened—the sum of which created a liveliness factor and an impression of being "in-studio" and witnessing the moment-to-moment creative work of the musicians.

B.audio is a young company by high-end standards, but the Alpha One performed like an old pro. I consider its TAS debut nothing short of exemplary—an appraisal validated by the news that TAS's sister publication *hifi+* awarded the B.Amp Mono its Product of the Year award for Amplification over $20,000 in 2023. For me, Alpha One checked all the boxes, sonics, features, power, plus a compact footprint that makes it welcome in space-challenged listening rooms like mine. Under the guidance of the Bermann brothers, B.audio is a name that I will long remember. I know that I'll never forget the time I spent with Alpha One. Enthusiastically recommended.

Background on B.audio

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT B.AUDIO I turned to the team of Rich Maez and Jon Baker of Monarch Systems Ltd, B.audio's North American distributors. The company was founded in 2016 by a pair of brothers, both engineers, Cédric and Sébastien Bermann. Cédric is an expert in electronics and signal processing, notably in the medical-devices world, with a wide experience in the design of precision measuring equipment for electrical networks. Sébastien has worked on numerous research and development projects at Mercedes-Benz and has specific expertise in the area of tuning and testing. These experiences laid the groundwork and informed their designs, both technologically and esthetically. The brothers unfailingly credit much of their inspiration to their father's passion for music and technology. The company is based in Saint-Hippolyte, a small town in eastern France near the German border, about 15 miles from Strasbourg.

B.audio develops its hardware and software in-house. Direct factory support is offered, which in the era of frequent updates is especially helpful when an issue confronts the end user. Further, subassemblies like circuit boards or metalwork are designed in-house but built or manufactured by very carefully chosen subcontractors, most of whom work with larger companies and are adept at strict quality control and pre-testing. Once the pieces arrive at the factory, they're tested again, assembled into finished products, tested as a whole unit, burned in, tested again, and shipped. The entire factory operates on the JIT (Just-In-Time) manufacturing principle, and it can generally produce products in approximately 10 days to two weeks (including assembly, testing, etc.) Maez and Baker added that if they don't have them in stock in the U.S., the item will be airfreighted to them for a final check, with the customer usually receiving the component(s) in less than a month. tas

avantgarde
acoustic

New
Mezzo G3

Two Versions:
Passive or Powered by
iTRON built-in amplifiers

Custom Horns & Cabinets
- 12 horn colours
- 6 cabinet finishes
- Or, your own colours and finishes

MEZZO

Find your nearest dealer online
at www.audiopathways.com

Andromeda	Milky Way	Black Wenge
Black Hole	Very Venus	American Walnut
Genuine Red	Galactic Glow	Cherrywood
Total Eclipse	Nocturn Grey	German Oak
Red Giant	Goose Bump	Black Matt Lacquer
White Dwarf	Audiophile Heaven	White Matt Lacquer

American Sound
DISTRIBUTING WORLD-CLASS HIGH-END AUDIO
12261 Yonge St.
Richmond Hill, ON
L4E 3M7 CANADA

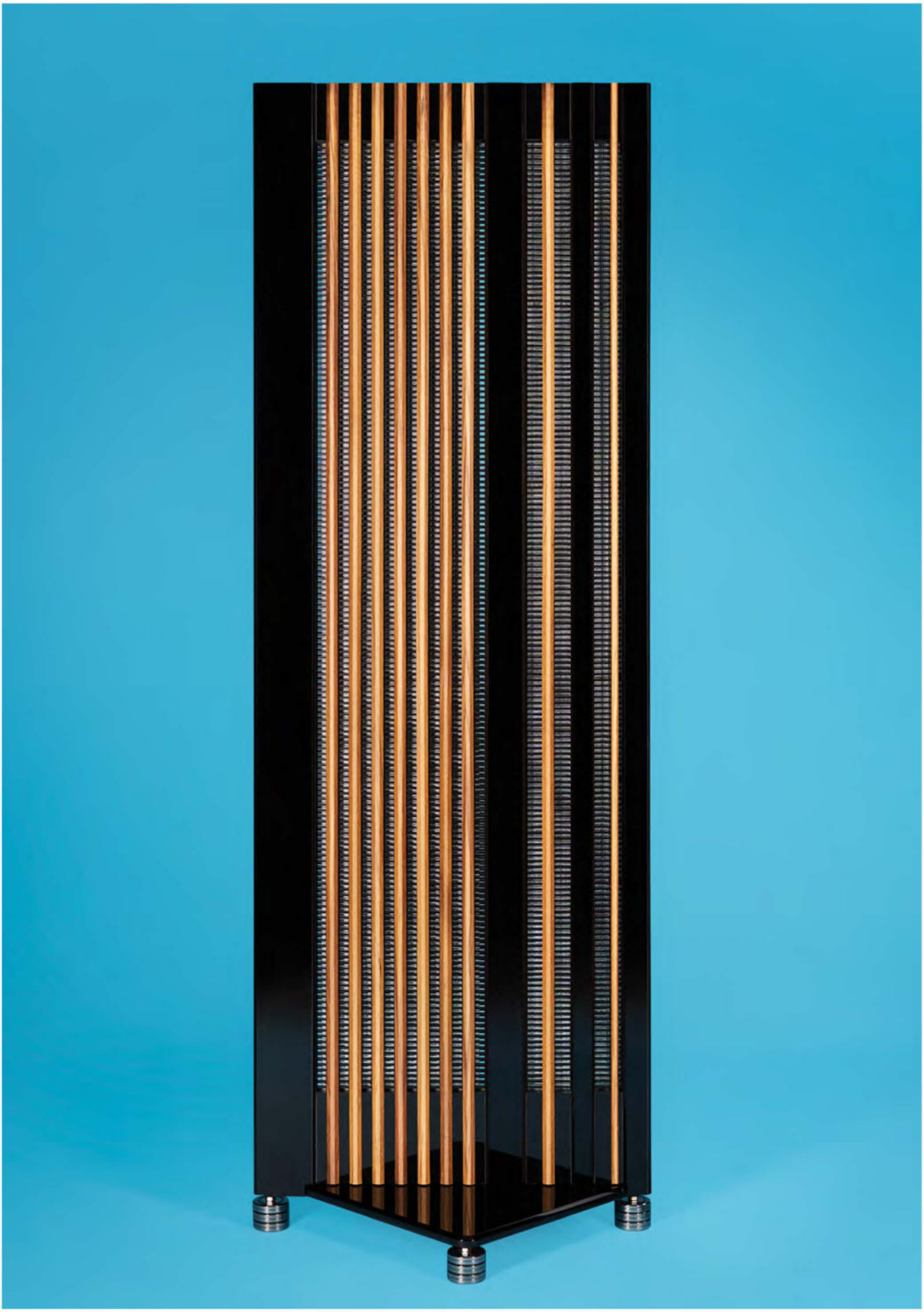
OVER 40 YEARS EXPERIENCE

Dealer Inquiries
(905) 773-7810
www.audiopathways.com
angie@americansound.com

PULLING THE SWORD FROM THE STONE

ALSYVOX CARAVAGGIO FULL-RANGE RIBBON LOUDSPEAKER

BY ROBERT HARLEY



OF the many thousands of hi-fi systems I've heard at shows over the years, two of the best-sounding and most memorable were based on full-range ribbon speakers made by the Spanish company AlsyVox.

The first was at the 2018 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest where Jonathan Valin enthusiastically ushered me to the AlsyVox room in a rare "You've got to hear this!" moment. He was right; the AlsyVox sounded like nothing else at the show, with a transparency, continuousness, and lifelike realism that eluded every box speaker in Denver. Although we were interested in reviewing the speaker, AlsyVox was at the time a small unknown company with no U.S. distributor and no U.S. dealers. As good as a product may potentially be, it doesn't make sense to review a component that no one in North America can audition or buy.

Then at the 2023 Munich High-End show, I again encountered AlsyVox, but this time the company demonstrated a much more advanced model than what we heard in Denver. More importantly, AlsyVox now had a high-quality U.S. distributor, Rhapsody Audio, and its speakers could be heard in six showrooms across the U.S. (New York, Chicago, West Palm Beach, San Francisco, Portland Oregon, and Dallas). The sound in Munich was breathtaking—perhaps the best sound I've heard at an audio show. That second demo, combined with the speaker's U.S. availability, sealed the deal; I would review the company's Caravaggio, the second-from-top model.

If you're like me, the description "full-range ribbon" conjures up the stereotype of a speaker that's fiendishly difficult to drive because of its combination of ultra-low impedance, hunger for current, and low sensitivity. Conventional wisdom also holds that full-range ribbons don't play loudly, don't go low in the bass, lack dynamic oomph in the bottom end, and generally sacrifice visceral excitement for fabulous transparency, speed, and resolution. This generalization is understandable considering that the speaker that largely established that stereotype was the Apogee of the 1980s. That speaker was notorious for blowing up even dreadnought amplifiers, as well as for its overall fussiness. But it was also justly celebrated for its glorious midrange, high resolution, transient fidelity, and spectacular spatial presentation.

But the question remains: Are these limitations inherent in ribbon technology, or can they be overcome with innovative execution?

That question has been answered by AlsyVox founder Daniele Coen, a man who has spent the past 40 years dedicated to perfecting the ribbon loudspeaker. An aerospace engineer by training and an Italian who now lives in Spain, Daniele built his first ribbon speaker 40 years ago as a university student. He worked with a small Italian speaker company for many years, but then founded AlsyVox in 2017 to create the ultimate expression of his life's work.

The result is a full-range ribbon speaker that overcomes the genre's traditional shortcomings. Consider the Caravaggio's astonishing specs: 94dB sensitivity, 4-ohm impedance, and bass extension to 22Hz (the company's Raffaello has a sensitivity of 97dB). Daniele's full-range ribbons are such an easy load that he drives his own Caravaggios at home with a 12W single-ended triode amplifier. Think about that: a full-range ribbon driven by a 12W SET. It defies belief.

The Caravaggio reviewed here is the second-from-the-top in the four-model range. I heard the top Rafaello in Munich, but that speaker, with its dual side-by-side woofers, is too big for my 18' x 27' room. Besides, the Caravaggio has a unique dual-midrange driver that the company says confers a special quality through the mids. The Caravaggio is a little over seven feet tall, two-and-a-quarter feet wide, and just over two inches thick. It is a four-way design with a massive crossover housed in a separate enclosure that sits behind the speaker. The speaker's steel frame is clad in black acrylic, with vertical strips of teak wood elegantly highlighting the drivers. The speaker rests on a platform that is supported by four isolation feet. Despite its size, the Caravaggio has an elegant and sophisticated visual presence.

The four ribbon drivers are made in-house. The diaphragm of aluminum-coated Mylar, just 40 microns (about one-and-a-half thousands of an inch) thick, is pleated and tensioned by specialized equipment designed and built by AlsyVox. Nearly 2000 N42 neodymium magnets provide the magnetic driving force, each one hand-installed in the frame. The woofer and midrange drivers are push-pull, with a magnet array on each side of the ribbon diaphragm. In fact, this massive deployment of extremely powerful magnets, along with the push-pull design, is part of the secret to the speaker's high sensitivity, extended bass response, and dynamic capabilities. It's safe to say that no ribbon speaker has ever been built at this level of execution. Consider that each speaker weighs 330 pounds out of the crate without the crossover.

The Caravaggio costs $200,070 with the standard X Cross-

THIS MASSIVE DEPLOYMENT OF EXTREMELY POWERFUL MAGNETS, ALONG WITH THE PUSH-PULL DESIGN, IS PART OF THE SECRET TO THE SPEAKER'S HIGH SENSITIVITY

over, and $258,421 with the upgraded XX Crossover, the configuration reviewed here. The two crossovers are identical in topology, but the XX features exotic cost-no-object inductors, capacitors, and resistors. As described in the sidebar, the crossover is fully symmetrical, which doubles the number of components required.

The sidebar has more design details, but this is a good place for a refresher on ribbon speakers. The term "ribbon" has been applied to any flat-panel speaker that is driven magnetically (as opposed to electrostatically, as in an electrostat). But there's a distinction between a true ribbon and other types of planar-magnetic speakers. That distinction is this: In a ribbon speaker the entire diaphragm is electrically conductive, and the audio signal flows through the diaphragm. This is contrasted with a speaker like the Magneplanar in which a thin conductor is bonded to a non-conductive film diaphragm. The audio signal flows through the conductor, generating the varying magnetic field that reacts with the fixed magnetic field to move the diaphragm back and forth. You can think of the conductor bonded to the diaphragm as analogous to the voice coil in a dynamic speaker, but here in straight-line segments. In a ribbon speaker, the diaphragm *is* the conductor, and has the advantage of being driven uniformly over its entire surface area. There's one other fine distinction you should consider: A ribbon is a "true" ribbon if it is attached to the frame only at the top and bottom. Drivers with fully conductive diaphragms that are attached to the frame along all four sides are technically called "planar" drivers. Consequently, the Caravaggio has, technically speaking, ribbon midrange, tweeter, and supertweeter drivers, and a planar woofer. Despite this distinction, I think of the AlsyVox speakers as "full-range ribbons."

Listening

Daniele Coen traveled from his base in Valencia, Spain, to my home in Albuquerque to set up the Caravaggio. He was accompanied by Bob Visintainer, proprietor of Rhapsody Audio and AlsyVox's U.S. distributor. Rhapsody has an interesting business model; in addition to a showroom in Brooklyn where Bob is based, there are five additional Rhapsody listening rooms around the country. Most of these are customer homes where a potential purchaser can listen to a range of Rhapsody-represented products and then complete the purchase through Bob in Brooklyn. The Rhapsody room in Dallas was specially built by a customer who was so taken by the sound of his Al-

syVox speakers in his home that he opened a separate commercial showroom with two identical built-from-scratch listening rooms, one for AlsyVox and one housing the mighty $750k Magico M9.

The Caravaggios arrived with the speakers packed in individual flight cases and stacked flat on a pallet. Two large plastic cases housed the external crossovers. Removing the speakers from the flight cases and assembling the base and feet is a delicate and time-consuming process. After the speakers were assembled, we spent the rest of the day and most of the following day listening and fine-tuning the placement and the crossover settings.

As described in the sidebar, the crossover has input terminals to connect to the power amplifier and four output sections terminated with SpeakOn jacks, one section for each of the Caravaggio's four drivers. Each of the four output sections offers multiple jacks of slightly varying output levels so that you can fine-tune the tonal balance; you simply connect the umbilical cable to a different jack for a bit of boost or cut if desired. Because the crossover is fully symmetrical, you actually move two cables per driver to engage the boost or cut.

I was surprised by where Daniele and Bob positioned the speakers as a starting point—far out into the room (9' from the backwall) and spread impossibly widely apart. Dynamic speakers in this position would have no center-image solidity, but that was not a problem for the Caravaggio. The speakers were positioned almost right next to the sidewalls, which doesn't induce the usual problems of side-wall reflections because of the flat panel's dipolar radiation pattern. Viewed from above, the speaker produces sound in a figure-of-eight pattern, with almost no energy directed to the sides but equal energy directed behind the speaker and in front of it. In addition, planar speakers have very narrow vertical dispersion, which means almost no ceiling and floor bounce. You can see on *The Absolute Sound*'s YouTube channel a video of Daniele in my listening room describing the Caravaggio.

The speaker has no provision for biwiring or biamping, so we ran the CH Precision M10 amplifiers in 300W mono mode. Daniele and Bob were both very happy with the Caravaggio's performance in my room. In fact, that's an understatement; the ability to position the speakers anywhere in the room without domestic considerations is a key element in realizing the Caravaggio's potential. Plenty of space between the speaker and the wall behind is essential to its performance.

Describing the experience of listening to music through the Caravaggio is a challenge because the sound is so different from that of point-source dynamic speakers. That challenge was made even more difficult by the Caravaggio's stunning performance in so many areas. (Where does one begin?) Moreover, the Caravaggio's extraordinary qualities combine synergistically, with one amplifying the other, making it more difficult to ascribe a specific musical perception to a specific performance attribute. Indeed, the Caravaggio's continuousness of presentation and organic "wholeness" defies dissection.

It doesn't take a "golden ear" or even any previous exposure to high-quality audio to instantly appreciate that the Caravaggio doesn't sound like a box speaker. It has a vivid and lifelike realism in timbre, imaging, transient speed, resolution, physical energy, and in dynamics that make it sound that much closer to live music. The instant the music starts, there's a sudden *frisson* of excitement as this remarkable loudspeaker brings the music to life.

This gestalt reaction is the result of a host of specific performance attributes that I shall try to parse and describe. The

... A KIND OF PHYSICALITY TO THE SOUND, NOT JUST IN THE USUAL TERMS OF BOTTOM-END WEIGHT AND HEFT, BUT IN THE TANGIBILITY AND PRESENCE OF INSTRUMENTAL AND VOCAL IMAGES ...

first is that the Caravaggio presents a kind of physicality to the sound, not just in the usual terms of bottom-end weight and heft, but in the tangibility and presence of instrumental and vocal images, both texturally and spatially. The impression of an instrument or vocalist existing in your listening room—*right there*—is spooky. The way images float in space, completely detached from the loudspeakers, is unlike that of any dynamic loudspeaker. A vocal entrance is startling in how it suddenly appears with such realism and tangibility. Images have bodies, as though they were three-dimensional entities, not flat projections. Percussion instruments sound like they are in the room with you—the transient fidelity, resolution, and timbral realism combining to thrilling effect. I was listening to the Analogue Productions LP of *Getz/Gilberto* and the entrance of Getz's golden-honey-hued sax was so lifelike that it sounded as though it were recorded yesterday. The effect is simply thrilling. (Fans of this record should check out his lesser known but musically and sonically equal predecessor *Jazz Samba*, with guitarist Charlie Byrd.)

The Caravaggio has a very present, immediate, and upfront spatial presentation, but not in a forward or aggressive way. Rather, it simply has an extraordinary vividness and tangibility of instrumental and vocal images. Lead instruments and vocals are upfront, but quieter instruments and those toward the back of the soundstage are appropriately positioned in depth. In fact, the soundstage depth, air between images, and ability to hear deep into the hall's acoustic are nothing short of stunning. The massive soundstage is incredibly detailed and resolved, with pinpoint image localization, extremely fine resolution of the lowest-level information, and transients of even the quietest sounds imbued with lifelike realism.

This stunning sense of depth and dimensionality is only half the story; the Caravaggio's soundstage is literally wall-to-wall; these speakers can be positioned much farther apart than box speakers without losing center-image focus. The result is that the astounding spatial presentation isn't confined to a window in front of you, but rather seems to occupy the entire front half of the room with no definite borders. If it sounds like the entire front half of the room is participating in reproducing the soundstage, that's because it is. The Caravaggio's dipolar radiation pattern produces just as much sound from the back as the front that faces the listener. Moreover, the speaker's radiating area is massive compared to that of a dynamic loudspeaker. Combine those two factors, and you have a recipe for a sound that's not confined within a window frame but rather creates a convincing illusion of replacing the listening room with the recorded acoustic. Play something like *The Arnold Overtures* in 176/24 from Reference Recordings, and you'll hear a cavernous acoustic populated with images precisely positioned along a continuum from front to back with tremendous resolution of the individual players and sections within that acoustic.

This spatial immediacy is fostered by the speaker's utter transparency—a sense of nothing between you and the music—but also by the Caravaggio's spectacular reproduction of timbral density, tone color, and physicality with instrumental and vocal textures.

I had a feeling of immersion in whatever acoustic space the recording was made in, from intimate studio recordings to concert halls and everything in between. Yet I never felt that the Caravaggio was "inventing" this sense of space, making everything sound expansive. Rather, the Caravaggio accurately reflected what was on the recording. An intimate track like Neil Young's beautiful "Harvest Moon" was portrayed with appropriate images sizes and overall scale. Speaking of intimacy, the

A LIFELIKE IMMEDIACY AND PINPOINT LOCALIZATION THAT INFUSES THE SOUNDSTAGE WITH A SENSE OF VIBRANCY

DS Audio

Tetsuaki "Aki-san" Aoyagi
DS Audio visionary

THE FUTURE OF ANALOG MUSIC JUST GOT MORE AFFORDABLE

HANDMADE
IN JAPAN

musicalsurroundings.com 510.547.5006

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS 33 1/3
EST. 1991 - OAKLAND, CA

Caravaggio has an uncanny ability to create the impression of the performer communicating directly with you in that immediate moment, so realistic are the timbre, image tangibility, and sense that the music simply exists rather than being recreated by an electro-mechanical contrivance. In this sense, the Caravaggio crosses some kind of threshold, leading the listener into a powerful involvement in the musical expression.

To realize this performance, however, you must be prepared to position the Caravaggios well out into the listening space away from the backwall. The speakers were positioned in my room 14' apart (outer edge to outer edge) but only 9' from the listening seat (they were nearly 9' from the wall behind them). I've never had speakers spread so wide in relation to the listening distance. While experimenting with placement in my room, moving the speakers back toward the wall behind them slightly diminished the depth and feeling of the soundstage having no boundaries. (It also increased the bottom-end heft and weight.) Even a foot makes a difference. The soundstage was still fully developed and deep, but that last measure of magic only happened with the speakers very far out into the room. Don't plan to put the Caravaggio a foot from the wall behind it and expect it to reveal the full measure of depth encoded on some recordings.

When I was studying recording engineering many years ago, I read an interview with a famous engineer who said, "I love the sound of air above 20kHz." That expression stuck with me and was brought vividly to mind by the AlsyVox's feeling of unlimited top-end extension. It was like taking a lid off the soundstage, with the sense of air seemingly extending to the stratosphere. The Caravaggio's treble is so open, extended, fast, detailed, and transparent, yet never bright or edgy. This speaker's transient speed and resolution are simply thrilling. I think that this quickness in reproducing leading-edge transient signals without overhang contributes to the Caravaggio's richly detailed soundstage. Very low-level sounds, particularly transient sounds such as percussion, have a lifelike immediacy and pinpoint localization that infuses the soundstage with a sense of vibrancy. (See the sidebar for more on the relationship between transient speed and image localization.)

The Caravaggio's ability to resolve vanishing low-level treble detail further contributed to that sense of lifelike realism. For example, maracas don't sound like a swish of treble energy, but rather like many tiny beads colliding in a hollow wooden vessel. The individual transients that make up the instrument's sound are fully resolved rather than being smeared. Brushes on snare drum have a similar verisimilitude in the exquisite resolution of the instrument's micro-structure. This may sound inconsequential at best, but it's details like this—and others in combination—that contribute, consciously and unconsciously, to the speaker crossing the threshold from great sound to a transcendental musical experience.

It seems somehow wrong to talk about the Caravaggio's treble separately because the top end sounds simply like an integral

THE *REAL* TOP OCTAVE

THE CARAVAGGIO'S treble response is flat to 40kHz. But since we can't hear sinewaves above 20kHz (more like 13kHz in middle age), what's the point of this extended treble response?

Although we can't hear ultrasonic sinewaves, we *can* hear the difference between a loudspeaker with 20kHz extension and one with 40kHz extension. The speaker with 40kHz extension can more accurately reproduce the temporal microstructure of sounds within the audioband. This faster transient speed can resolve timing information at lower frequencies and thus present a more realistic rendering of timbre. Until recently, it was believed that humans couldn't resolve this timing information because it was faster than what could be heard within a system of 20kHz bandwidth. In the last decade, however, researchers have independently confirmed that we are much more sensitive to timing information and temporal microstructure than predicted by our 20kHz frequency limit. (See, for example, "Human Time-Frequency Acuity Beats the Fourier Uncertainty Principle" by J.M. Oppenheim and M.O. Magnasco, *Physical Review Letters*, 2013.) It's this timing information that helps the brain perform the apparent miracle of converting neural impulses into the impression of hearing individual objects in space. Our hearing mechanism, particularly localization of sounds, is highly dependent on this timing information. Loudspeakers with bandwidth out to 40kHz, with their faster transient speed, can more accurately reproduce this timing information.

When I've added supertweeters to my main speakers (the Engima Acoustics Sopranino electrostatic, for example), I hear absolutely no change in tonal balance or added top-end energy. The amount of sound emerging from the supertweeter is so minimal that you're tempted to wonder if it is working. Subjectively, the supertweeter doesn't add treble energy or change the tonal balance. Rather, it expands the sense of space and better resolves very low-level details. With the supertweeter, you hear a layer of very fine information, particularly transient information such as brushes on snare drum. The soundstage becomes wider and deeper, with a greater sense of air between instruments. You also hear more precise localization of instruments within the soundstage, particularly on naturally miked recordings.

That's exactly what I hear with the Caravaggio; I think that part of its extraordinary sense of space, dimensionality, low-level resolution, and ultra-precise image focus is due to its 40kHz bandwidth and concomitant faster transient speed and more precise rendering of the temporal microstructure through the entire audioband.

MSB
TECHNOLOGY

It's not the recording... listen again

Introducing the all-new Cascade DAC

An innovative rethinking of digital to analog reproduction,
exclusively from MSB Technology

Contact Vince Galbo to audition MSB products at a dealer near you

tel: (716) 688-3527 | vince@msbtechnology.com

www.msbtechnology.com

part of the music, not a separate entity. A violin's overtones, for example, sound like what they are—a natural extension of the fundamentals, not the steely edge overlaying the timbre that is so often heard in reproduced music. The continuousness extended to the entire spectrum; the speaker presents a uniform voice, tonally and dynamically, from the bass to the top treble, with zero discontinuity between drivers.

The Caravaggio is distinguished by yet another quality that contributes to its sense of realism—instruments are reproduced with richness, power, and physicality, rather than as a pale vaporous facsimile. This quality is immediately apparent on every instrument, but particularly on piano. The Caravaggio reproduces a concert grand's full measure of weight, authority, and majestic power, manifesting a more authentic rendering of the instrument's size, presence, and tangibility. Big left-hand chords are simply phenomenal, possessing a thundering quality that's musically thrilling. This characteristic is due, in part, to the Caravaggio's massive radiating area, which can more closely approximate a piano's size. The way the big ribbon moves air is more like the way a piano radiates sound. The result is a density of tone color, a richness, and a feeling of being in the presence of a large object producing sound than is possible from even the best dynamic loudspeakers.

But it's not just the macro qualities that the Caravaggio gets right about piano—it's also the microdetails. Listening to Costantino Catena playing works by Debussy and Schumann on *Fazioli F278: The Sound of the Concert Grand*, I could hear the precise dynamic envelope of the hammer hitting the strings, the strings vibrating, the soundboard reinforcing the strings, and then how those sounds decay. The Caravaggio's ultra-fast transient response, exquisite resolution of fine detail, and ability to convey the instrument's physicality combine to make music that sounds at once realistic, visceral, immediate, and absolutely thrilling. Moreover, the sound is completely devoid of that metallic "shattering" character during forte passages in the upper register, a common loudspeaker affliction. I mention these individual components of the piano's sound not because the Caravaggio separates them or fosters an analytical dissection, but rather to describe how all the accuracy of these sonic components contributes to the speaker's overall sense of realism.

My great friend and colleague Neil Gader visited to hear the Caravaggio, and at the end of a short solo piano piece described in precise detail exactly what I've been talking about. The Caravaggio's qualities are unmistakable. I've used piano as an example because the instrument's size and physicality are so difficult to reproduce correctly, but the qualities I've described apply to every other instrument.

At this point you may be thinking that here comes the bad news—ribbons are hard to drive and lack visceral power in the bottom end. On the first point, although the Caravaggio benefited from the CH Precision's 300W, the power meters indicated that it could play at realistic levels with much less power. Indeed, I drove the Caravaggio's to any listening level with the 100W WestminsterLab Rei (reviewed in Issue 349). Daniele told me that his system with 12Wpc has many virtues, but that the Caravaggio's dynamic power, bass extension, and physicality are best realized with a moderate-to-high-powered solid-state amp.

And on the second point, what dynamic power, bass extension, and physicality this speaker delivers! It belies the stereotype of the ribbon speaker as polite, refined, delicate, and lacking bottom-end slam and dynamic contrasts. When you combine this power and weight with a ribbon speaker's unrivaled transient speed, the result is nothing short of thrilling.

Very late in the review process, I had an opportunity to perform the ultimate test of the Caravaggio's ease of being driven. Rick Brown of Hi-Fi One brought the

Introducing the AMG Giro MK II Wood

Incorporating a solid wood under-chassis that adds 20% more mass, this new Giro model features all of the performance upgrades of the MK II version with the natural elegance of hand crafted cherry wood, sustainably sourced from the Franconia region of southern Germany

Contact your nearest AMG dealer for details on a limited time offer including select Benz Micro cartridges at no charge. Visit **www.sierrasound.net** for a list of authorized AMG dealers.

SIERRA SOUND

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Full-range four-way ribbon loudspeaker
Frequency response: 22Hz–40kHz
Sensitivity: 94dB
Impedance: 4 ohms
Woofer width: 320mm
Midrange width: 37mm x2
Mid-tweeter width: 25mm
Supertweeter width: 5mm
Crossover frequencies: 700, 1500, 4500Hz
Dimensions: 2' 3" x 7' 3.8" x 0.213"
Weight: 330 lbs. each net, not including external crossover
Price: $200,070 with X Crossover, $258,421 with XX Crossover

ALSYVOX S.L.
Calle Doctor JJ Domine, 4/2
46011 Valencia - Spain
+34 697 454 945
info-alsyvox.com

RHAPSODY AUDIO (U.S. Distributor)
Brooklyn, NY
rhapsodyaudio.com

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT
Analog source: Basis Audio A.J. Conti Transcendence turntable with SuperArm 12.5 tonearm; Air Tight Opus cartridge; Moon 810LP phonostage
Digital source: Wadax Reference DAC, Reference Server, Reference PSU, Akasa interface
Amplification: CH Precision L10 Dual Monaural linestage; CH Precision M10 Dual Monaural power amplifiers
AC Power: Shunyata Everest 8000 and Shunyata Typhon 2 conditioners, Shunyata Omega and Sigma NR V2 power cords, Shunyata AC outlets, five dedicated 20A lines wired with identical length 10AWG
Support: Critical Mass Systems Olympus equipment racks and Olympus amplifier stands; CenterStage² isolation, Arya Audio RevOpods isolation
Cables: AudioQuest Dragon interconnects, AudioQuest Dragon Zero loudspeaker cables
Grounding: Shunyata Altaira grounding system
Accessories: The Chord Company GroundARAY noise reduction
Acoustics: Acoustic Geometry Pro Room Pack 12, ASC 16" Round Tube Traps
Room: Purpose-built; Acoustic Sciences Corporation Iso-Wall System

David Berning/Hi-Fi One SET Reference 20W ZOTL monoblock power amplifiers to my listening room (also see the video preview on our YouTube channel). Although far from a typical SET in every way, particularly in bass impact and dynamic performance, the 20W SET drove the Caravaggio to fully satisfying listening levels with shocking bass weight, power, and dynamic impact. The SET also revealed something else about the Caravaggio; the speaker had even more to give in exquisite rendering of timbre, liquidity, treble smoothness. The Berning/Hi-Fi One SET's many virtues combined synergistically with those of the Caravaggio, resulting in a heart-melting sound that transcends mere "hi-fi."

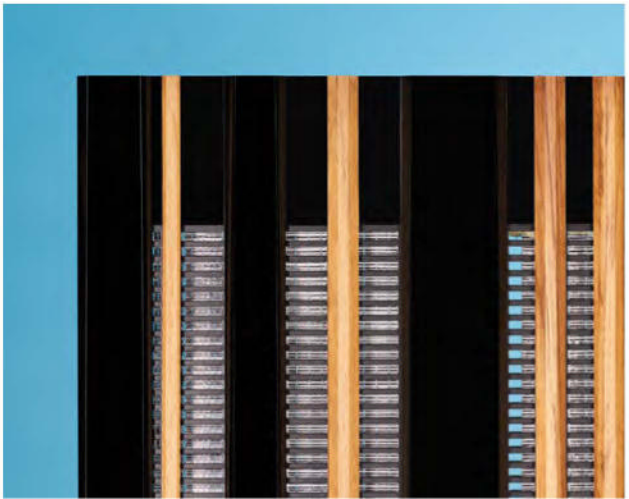
Conclusion

I must begin this summary with a caveat. The performance I've described was realized with ideal placement of the Caravaggio well out into the room with plenty of space (nearly 9') between the speaker and the wall behind it. I'm sure that the Caravaggio can sound wonderful closer to the wall, but to realize its full potential, you need to position the speakers away from the backwall, which can be a challenge in many homes.

With that dispensed with, I can say that the Caravaggio is one of the world's greatest loudspeakers. The qualities that make it so spectacular are manifold: uncannily realistic rendering of timbre, image tangibility, expansive and detailed spatial presentation, ability to portray the physicality of instruments, transparency, resolution, and transient speed. The Caravaggio also transcends the traditional limitations of ribbon speakers; it is remarkably easy to drive, will play loudly, and delivers fabulous bass weight and low-end dynamic authority. In this sense, it is a *sui generis* creation.

But describing the Caravaggio with this audiophile checklist seems somehow wrong. This big ribbon is utterly coherent and continuous in every way, sounding so uncannily like live music that it makes you instantly forget about specific sonic criteria. The best summary of the Caravaggio is this: Every time I sat down to listen, I felt a visceral thrill the instant the Caravaggio brought the music to life—a thrill that was sustained over many hours and across diverse musical genres.

It's a magic trick that never gets old.



scott walker audio

DFW's Ultimate 2-Channel Destination -- Located in Keller, Texas

Acora • Acoustic Signature • Airtight • Anthem • Artesania • ASC • Aurender • Berkeley Audio • Bowers & Wilkins • Devialet • Estelon • GoldenEar • Ideon • JL Audio • JMF Audio • Lumin • Lyra • Magico • McIntosh • MSB Technology • NAD • Ortofon • Pear Audio • Pro-ject • Rogue Audio • Roon • Rotel • Shelter • Solid Tech • Sonorus • Sonus Faber • Soundsmith • Soulution • Synergistic Research • Taiko Audio • VAC • Vitus • Von Schweikert • VPI

1101 Keller Pkwy. Keller, TX 76248 -- (817) 320-3145

A RIBBON SPEAKER LIKE NO OTHER

ALTHOUGH THE RIBBON speaker was patented in 1923, it's safe to say that no ribbon speakers have ever been built with the level of execution of the AlsyVoxes.

The Caravaggio is a four-way system employing a planar woofer with a surface area of 5376 square centimeters (about 833 square inches). For comparison, a 10" woofer's surface area is 79 square inches. Looking at the photo, the woofer area is behind the section with the seven teak wood strips. The woofer diaphragm has an excursion of up to 20mm (almost 0.8"). When you consider that the acoustic output of a vibrating surface is a function of the surface area and excursion, you can appreciate that the Caravaggio can move a lot of air. Unlike the other three drivers that are attached to the frame only at the top and bottom, the woofer diaphragm is attached at all four sides, technically making the driver a planar design rather than a true ribbon.

The diaphragm, 40 microns thick, is made from Mylar coated with aluminum. It is pleated for strength and suspended between two opposing magnetic fields in a push-pull arrangement, with a magnetic motor in front of the diaphragm and one behind it. One side pulls the diaphragm while the other side pushes it, making its movement more linear, delivering wider dynamic range, and theoretically increasing the sensitivity by 6dB (5dB in practice). The push-pull design also keeps the diaphragm within the magnetic field at its excursion limits. (You may be familiar with a phenomenon in dynamic drivers in which the voice coil begins to leave the magnetic gap at the ends of its excursion.) The woofer's two magnetic motors must be pressed together into the frame under enormous pressure to overcome the magnetic repulsion of the two opposing magnetic fields.

The midrange driver is also push-pull, but with a much smaller surface area (two 37mm-wide diaphragms) than the woofer and is suspended in the frame only at the top and bottom, making it a true ribbon. The Caravaggio is unique in the AlsyVox line (and among all ribbon speakers that I know of) in that it has two diaphragms side-by-side that are connected in series. By doubling the diaphragm surface area, the same sound-pressure level can be realized with half the excursion, widening the linear dynamic range and increasing the power handling. The dual midrange ribbons are separated by a single strip of teak wood. I suspect that the larger surface area confers some of the same benefits of the woofer's large radiating surface—textural density and sense of physicality. Moreover, the integration between the woofer and midrange may be smoother because there's less of a discontinuity in driver surface area.

The tweeter is 25mm wide and is separated from the supertweeter by a thin strip of teak wood. The Caravaggio's supertweeter is so narrow (5mm) that you may miss it at first glance. The supertweeter's response extends to an amazing 40kHz (see sidebar). The speakers are made in mirror-imaged pairs with the supertweeters on the inside edges when installed.

Crossover frequencies are 700Hz, 1500Hz, and 4500Hz, all with first-order slopes. The woofer's electrical crossover point is 190Hz, but because the woofer's output rises with frequency, the acoustic crossover point is 700Hz.

The massive external crossover is fully symmetrical, meaning that the positive and negative legs each have an identical circuit. Typically, crossovers have just one circuit and a ground rather than two identical parallel circuits. The symmetrical design doubles the number of parts, which in the case of the Caravaggio, are exotic cost-no-object types. That explains the significant upgrade cost from the standard crossover (the Caravaggio costs $200,070 with the standard X Crossover and $258,421 with the upgraded XX Crossover). Even the parts in the standard crossover are very high-end—Duelund Cast Polypropylene in the X crossover, for example. But the XX Crossover features Duelund's very best (and breathtakingly expensive) Cast CuSN copper-foil capacitors, among other ultra-exotic parts.

The crossover has a pair of binding posts for connection to the amplifier, along with SpeakOn jacks for connecting the four supplied umbilical cables to the speaker. Each of the four output sections (corresponding to the woofer, midrange, tweeter, and supertweeter) offers multiple jacks of very slightly varying output levels for fine-tuning the tonal balance; you simply connect the pair of umbilical cables for that driver to a different SpeakOn jack. The woofer-output section offers a flat position, +1.2dB, and –1.2dB. The midrange and tweeter have flat, +0.5dB, and –0.5dB jacks, and the supertweeter has three settings, flat, +1dB, and –1dB. Note that there are no switches in the circuit to realize this adjustability, only resistors of varying levels integral to the crossover. One can move the SpeakOn-terminated cable from one output to another while music is playing. The crossover is housed in a black acrylic enclosure.

The frame is a massive steel panel that is laser cut to accommodate insertion of the ribbon drivers. It is covered with black acrylic, although other color options are available. Nearly 2000 N42 neodymium magnets are hand-glued to the frame. The speaker is built so that drivers can easily be replaced in the field should a failure occur. Bob Visintainer, the U.S. distributor, can perform any repair necessary in the customer's home.

Finally, the Caravaggio is attached to a square base into which are bolted four isolation feet. The feet are a three-piece design made from brass with stainless-steel balls between the layers. The three sections can move independently of each other, a design AlsyVox says prevents vibration from being reflected back into the frame. tas

the absolute sound®

Digital magazine subscription $10
Get Instant Delivery
Download & Read Offline, Anywhere
Mobile-Optimized Reading

https://www.zinio.com/the-absolute-sound-m39073

Getz/Gilberto Revisited

Irresistible Blend of Bossa Nova and Jazz

Neil Gader

Astrud Gilberto & Monica Getz.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MONICA GETZ

No album better expressed and popularized Bossa Nova in America in the early 60s than *Getz/Gilberto*. Emerging from Brazil's midcentury music scene, Bossa Nova (or "New Wave") married its soft samba rhythms and understated syncopation with American jazz inflections. But it was the cross-cultural collaboration between tenor sax icon Stan Getz and guitarist/vocalist João Gilberto that proved irresistible. And no song captured the imagination and sensual, swaying essence of Bossa Nova like "The Girl from Ipanema," the hit single from the album, which was sung by João Gilberto's wife, Astrud Gilberto. Astrud's vocals lifted the track to No. 5 on the US pop singles chart in the summer of 1964. If that wasn't enough, *Getz/Gilberto* also introduced to American audiences the brilliant composer/pianist Antonio Carlos Jobim, who, with Gilberto fueled the Bossa Nova movement in Brazil and ultimately around the world.

The talent at the session wasn't limited to the brilliant musicians either; it was in the booth as well. An early Bossa Nova enthusiast, producer Creed Taylor had previously worked with Getz and guitarist Charlie Byrd on the hit album *Jazz Samba* in 1962. Engineering and mixing for *Getz/Gilberto* was by a youthful Phil Ramone at his studio, A & R Recording in New York. After a delayed release *Getz/Gilberto* scored a Grammy in 1965 for Album of the Year, and for Record of the Year for "The Girl from Ipanema," which remains one of the most recorded songs of all time. It went on to become one of the best-selling jazz albums to this day. (Ramone received an engineering Grammy as well.)

It's an album that cried out for the white glove remastering, extra features, and ultra-packaging that only Abey Fonn of Impex Records can produce. Fonn and her team have outdone themselves with this 180-gram, 45rpm 2-LP set. Engineer extraordinaire Bernie Grundman remastered from the original analog master tapes and agreed to a pure analog chain throughout—no computers, no doctoring or edits. The lacquers were cut employing the costly 1STEP Process, a format that skips the regular father-mother process, going directly to a single convert. With this labor and time intensive project, a fresh lacquer was struck every 500 pressings. The release is limited to 7500 pressings. The vinyl formulation is the semi-transparent NeoTech VR900-Supreme Vinyl. The surfaces were as flawless and noise-free as I've ever experienced. The set is presented in premium packaging—original artwork in a heavy stock gatefold jacket and a brilliant yellow outer slipcase.

In a new essay from the lavish 36-page booklet included in the gatefold of this release, Stan's wife and business partner Monica Getz relate that it was a serendipitous gathering in Gilberto's New York hotel room following his Carnegie Hall concert in 1962 that sparked what would become one of the great and lasting music collaborations. Though they could barely understand each other, Stan Getz and João Gilberto soon found they spoke the same musical language. The timing couldn't have been better for the flagging jazz segment, which found itself competing with British Invasion rock 'n' roll and foundering in its own controversial freeform style. As if in response, *Getz/Gilberto* was the perfect balm. Accompanied by top-notch sidemen (Milton Banana on drums and Sebastião Neto on bass), the eight tracks, six of which were written by Jobim, are a showcase for Getz's endlessly inventive, smooth, and melodic solos juxtaposed with Gilberto's gentle but rhythmically provocative and sophisticated guitar accompaniment.

Sonically, Impex has taken a very good recording and added a sense of fluidity, immediacy, and dimensionality that raises it to truly transparent state-of-the-art levels. Listen closely and you can almost sense the temperature in the studio and measure the distance between musicians. Timbres are spot on and balances are superb, with lush warm vocals, a resonant, pitch-perfect standup bass, and colorful understated percussion. Even now Astrud Gilberto's vocal perfectly mirrors the image of the enigmatic "Tall and tan and young and lovely" girl walking into a soft breeze along a tropical beach. This performance remains delightfully unself-conscious and carelessly unaware of its beauty.

Also included are a terrific pair of bonus tracks—the no-echo, monophonic mix from the 7-inch single of "The Girl from Ipanema," that's minus Getz's solo, and a stereo Carnegie Hall performance recording of "Corcovado" (also known as "Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars"). The large-format booklet features dozens of rare and previously unpublished photos plus the original album liner notes. The booklet also included remembrances and recollections with Monica Getz and her son Nicolaus about the making of the record plus an incisive new interview/essay by Charles Granata. *Getz/Gilberto* is a vinyl showpiece of sonic naturalism and superb artistry that puts most vinyl reissues to shame. An extraordinary effort. tas

musicdirect®

You Take Your Music Personally. So Do We.

- *Free Turntable Setup with Purchase**
- *Dedicated Customer Service Team*
- *60-Day Satisfaction Guarantee*

Eli C.
Turntable Specialist

We Proudly Carry Gear from These Leading Brands — And Many More.

McIntosh · KEF · LUXMAN · rose · marantz · rega · MoFi · LYRA · ARCAM · Technics · JBL · audioquest · CAMBRIDGE AUDIO · NAD · Bowers & Wilkins · VPI made in u.s.a. · Degritter · Klipsch

Contact Us!
312-433-0200
www.musicdirect.com

Check Out Our Latest Catalog!
Call for a free copy.

*Free turntable setup is included with the purchase of a turntable and phono cartridge.

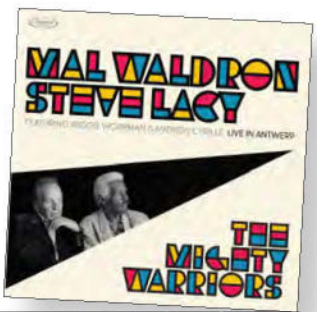
The Past Recaptured

Archival Releases Continue to Impress

Bill Milkowski

An event inaugurated in 2007, Record Store Day always offers a deluge of new archival releases. Either radio broadcasts or private recordings that were previously unissued and were newly unearthed by sonic archaeologists like Zev "The Jazz Detective," Cory Weeds, Jordi Soley, and Carlos Agustín Calembert, these restored gems shine a light on artists from yesteryear, some of whom have been relegated to the shadows with the passing of time. Appearing on labels like Elemental Music, Reel to Reel, Resonance, and Jazz Detective, these deluxe limited-edition sets, brimming with extensive liner notes, rare photos, and exclusive interviews for the substantial booklets contained within, help avid listeners fill in the blanks in their knowledge and their own collections. The following albums were released as 2-LP vinyl sets and compact discs, and while some of the vinyl will have sold out by the time this article appears, the compact discs will still be in print. All of these titles are well worth investigating.

The Mighty Warriors (Elemental Music) is a reunion between pianist Mal Waldron and soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy, musical partners and kindred spirits who first shared a stage together in 1958 at The Five Spot in NYC. Originally favoring a hard bop/post-bop approach during his fertile period as house pianist for Prestige Records from 1956 to 1958, Waldron gravitated toward the avant-garde following a stint with Eric Dolphy in 1961. His path in this freer direction was spurred on by collaborating with the similarly free-spirited Lacy through the 80s and 90s, particularly in piano-soprano duets featuring their own compositions as well as several by Thelonious Monk. Recorded on September 30, 1995, *The Mighty Warriors* documents their spirited encounter in the company of bassist Reggie Workman and drummer Andrew Cyrille. On the entrancing 17-minute opener, Waldron's "What It Is," they generate a driving momentum while diving headlong into provocative territory, both harmonically and rhythmically. The quartet's collective synergy on Lacy's dissonant, searching vehicle, "Longing," as well as on Workman's 25-minute free jazz excursion, "Variation of III," and Waldron's "Medley: Snake Out," is positively telepathic. And their renditions of Monk's "Epistrophy" and an ebullient, swinging "Monk's Dream," are reverent yet full of personal twists and turns. The sound quality on this exhilarating yet often challenging live disc is also superb.



Steve Lacy & Mal Waldron.

PHOTO BY HUGO PEETERS

A formidable, swinging presence on the West Coast jazz scene of the 50s as well as a first-call percussionist for television and film, Shelly Manne made over 50 albums as a leader and appeared as a sideman on classic albums by Stan Getz, Chet Baker, Jimmy Giuffre, Sonny Rollins, Barney Kessel, and Hampton Hawes. *Jazz from the Pacific Northwest* (Reel to Reel) documents two different incarnations of His Men from appearances at the 1958 Monterey Jazz Festival and a 1966 performance at The Penthouse in Seattle. The live Monterey set featuring pianist Russ Freeman, bassist Monty Ludwig, trumpeter

The Black DAC System
Sending the purist signal with exceptional musicality to your amplifier
bel canto
ETH 44.1 69
bel canto
www.belcantodesign.com
roon TIDAL qobuz vTuner USB phono
bel canto 25 YEARS

The Voice That Is
döhmann
HELIX ONE
www.thevoicethatis.com
610.359.0189
hi-fi+ WINNER 2023
TURNTABLE COST NO OBJECT
On Your Mark... III
Mark Döhmann's award winning Helix ONE Mk3 turntable
(shown with PrimaryControl Gravity TA & Lyra Atlas Lambda Cartridge)

IMPEX RECORDS™ | STEP™

Call Today!
866-768-5760

or visit us online at
elusivedisc.com

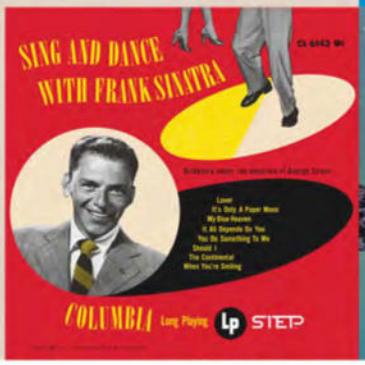
elusive DISC

A DEFINITIVE 2024

Redefine definitive

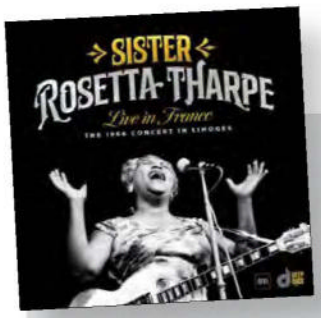
Available in black and audiophile Indigos Purple vinyl

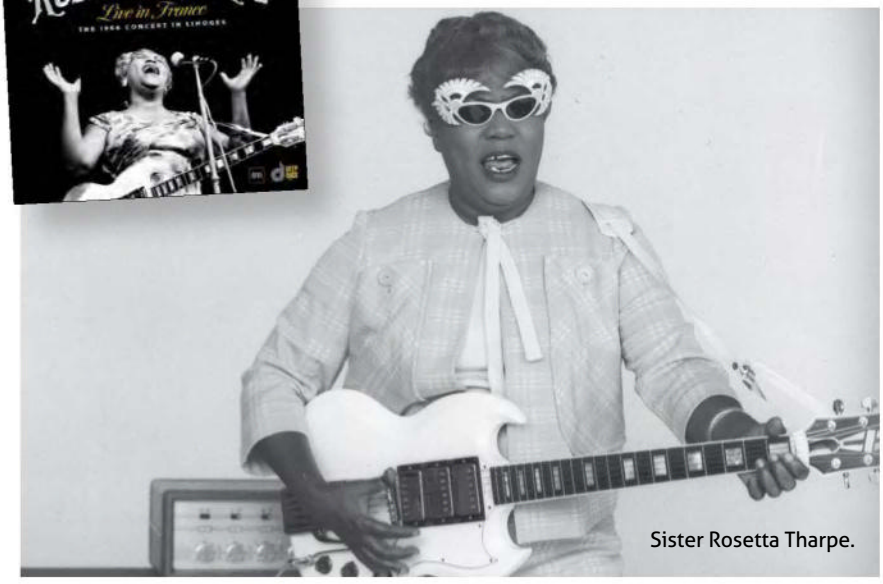
Available in black audiophile Seaglass Blue vinyl



Available in black and Clearaudio Flamenco Red vinyl

Fax: 765-608-5341 Info: 765-608-5340 2439 E 67th St., Anderson, IN 46013 sales@elusivedisc.com M-F: 9-6 EST





Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

PHOTO BY HANS HARZHEIM

These restored gems shine a light on artists from yesteryear, some of whom have been relegated to the shadows with the passing of time.

Stu Williamson, and the great alto saxophonist Herb Geller is the more stunning and better-sounding of the two. On the uptempo opener, "Stop, Look and Listen," Geller is turned loose on a Bird-like romp, and both Williamson and Freeman respond in kind. Geller flows effortlessly over the more relaxed midtempo swing groove of Charlie Mariano's "The Vamp's Blues," then Manne dips into his more experimental side on the 18-minute "Quartet (Suite in Four Movements)," which finds him alternating between sticks, brushes and mallets on his kit for maximum color. The leader's extended, unaccompanied mallets solo here is a dramatic highlight of this ambitious, mood-shifting work by composer-arranger Bill Holman. *Jazz from the Pacific Northwest* also features strong performances by tenor saxophonist Frank Strozier and trumpeter Conte Candoli on an aggressively swinging take on "Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise." Strozier switches to flute on a mellow/hip reading of Gershwin's "Summertime" and a burning romp through "Secret Love" that also features killer solos from Candoli and pianist Hampton Hawes. Vocalist Ruth Price sits in on swinging renditions of "Dearly Beloved" and "Surrey with The Fringe on Top."

Atlantis Lullaby: The Concert from Avignon features sax great Yusef Lateef at a 1972 concert alongside pianist Kenny Barron, bassist Bob Cunningham, and drummer Albert "Tootie" Heath. Lateef's robust tenor is captured in full flight on the scorching opener, Barron's modal "Inside Atlantis," before he switches to flute on a delicate duet with the pianist on Barron's "A Flower." Lateef is back on tenor, digging deep into the blues on his rockin' "Caledonia"-styled tune, "Yusef's Mood." Drummer Heath is featured playing Indian flute in duet with bassist Cunningham on his intimate and exotic "Lowland Lullaby." Roy Brooks' "Eboness," which effortlessly straddles Latin and boogaloo feels, features the leader once again on flute while showcasing Cunningham's arco work on bass. And Lateef's soulful tenor sax work on a slowed down reading of the standard "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You" speaks of the impact that Ben Webster had on his ballad playing. Barron's extended "The Untitled" finds the band alternately swinging at a furious tempo and delving into more meditative Eastern-flavored territory (a la John Coltrane's spiritual works) before summoning up the spiky avant-garde onslaughts of Cecil Taylor over the course of 25 minutes.

West Coast trumpeter/singers Chet Baker and Jack Sheldon join forces on *In Perfect Harmony: The Lost Album* (Jazz Detective). This 1972 studio session featuring pianist Dave Frishberg, electric bassist Joe Mondragon, and drummer Nick Ceroli finds the pals and frequent jamming partners splitting vocal duties and trumpet solos on engaging ditties like "This Can't Be Love," "Just Friends," "But Not for Me," "I Cried for You," and "I'm Old Fashioned." They exchange tender phrases on an instrumental version of Jobim's alluring bossa nova "Once I Loved," then get downright comical on Sheldon's "Too Blue" and Jimmy Rushing's "Evil Blues." And Baker's dreamy vocals on "When I Fall in Love" are positively transportive.

Trailblazing gospel singer and guitar player Sister Rosetta Tharpe is today known as "The Godmother of Rock 'n' Roll" for her earthy delivery and slightly distortion-laced electric guitar licks on her signature white Gibson SG. A dynamic performer and classic double threat through the 40s, 50s, and 60s, she was a major influence on Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Elvis Presley. *Live in France* (Elemental Music) documents her concert at the Grand Theater in Limoges, France on Nov. 11, 1966. Tharpe is in strong, sanctified voice here, accompanying herself on guitar (and tapping foot) on energized spiritual numbers like "This Train," "Didn't It Rain," "Up Above My Head, I Hear Music in the Air," and "Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho." Performing solo on a warmer, more resonant sounding Gibson Barney Kessel custom hollow body guitar, as opposed to her more stinging Gibson SG, Tharpe sings with a glorious, joyful power that rivaled Mahalia Jackson and predated Aretha Franklin. And she is positively ripping on the urgent, boogie-influenced "Sit Down" and the romping "Traveling Shoes." And she sounds spellbinding on sanctified numbers like "Beams of Heaven" and "Give Me That Old Time Religion." It's no wonder contemporary artists like Bonnie Raitt, Shemekia Copeland, and Susan Tedeschi were so deeply affected by Sister Rosetta. tas

Rael Against the World

Genesis Classic Receives White Glove Treatment

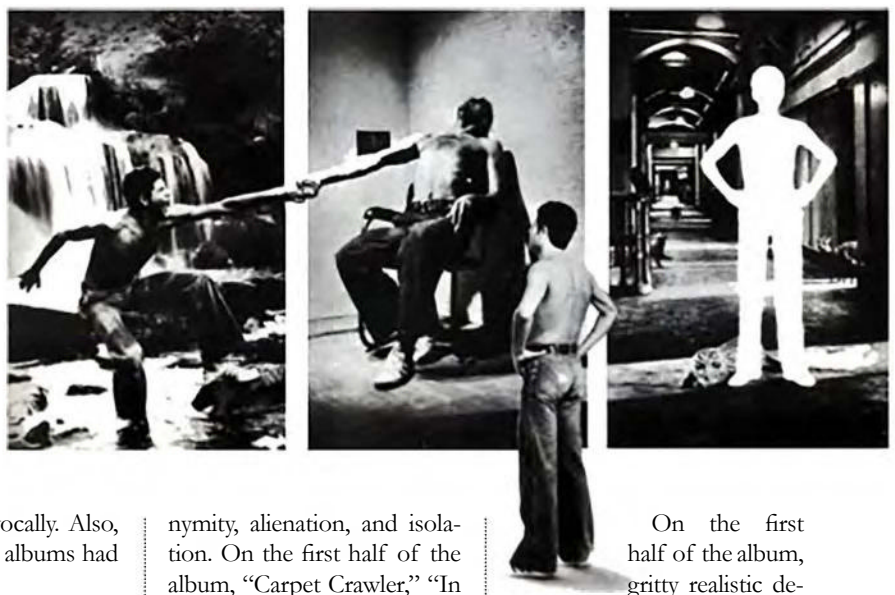
Jeff Wilson

Pay attention to the steady stream of audiophile reissues and you'll begin to recognize those records that continually get remastered and repackaged. At the same time, there are those projects make your ears perk up when you hear about them because they catch you by surprise. That's how I felt when Analogue Productions announced a UHQR edition of the White Stripes' *Elephant*. I tried to cram my thoughts about that reissue into a single-column review for Issue 346, but it quickly became clear that I needed to dig deeper.

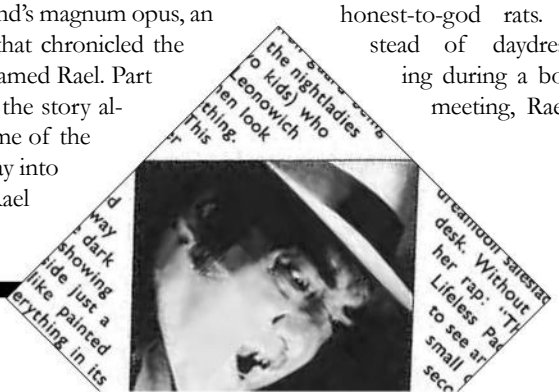
Now I've embarked on another deep dive, but this one's a bit more daunting. Also an Analogue Productions reissue, this LP is one of 75 Atlantic titles AP is remastering in connection with Atlantic's 75th Anniversary—and, as fate has it, I picked the most esoteric title on the list. There are some Genesis and Phil Collins albums in the Atlantic 75 Series, and their Genesis-related selections run the gamut from their thoroughly unconventional early years to straight-ahead pop. Included in that list is 1974's *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*. A 2-LP set, *The Lamb* was the sixth studio album by Genesis (there's also a live record from that period). At this point the band consisted of Phil Collins on drums, Michael Rutherford on bass, Tony Banks on keyboards, Steve Hackett on guitar, and Peter Gabriel on vocals. By now Genesis was firing on all pistons instrumentally, and Gabriel was always a sure bet vocally. Also, by now the murky recordings heard on their earliest albums had been replaced with a much cleaner sound.

***The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* was the final Gabriel-era Genesis album, and this time they pulled out all the stops.**

The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway was the final Gabriel-era Genesis album, and this time they pulled out all the stops. It's not as if, prior to Gabriel's departure, Genesis played it safe artistically or commercially. After all, who else composed a song addressing the perils of hogweed? Who else sang about Salmacis and Tiresias, who, in Greek mythology, were well-known for their gender fluidity? Who else described croquet mallets being used to behead a young sibling? That's strange stuff—but *The Lamb* took things to the next level. It's the band's magnum opus, an epic 94-minute 2-LP concept album that chronicled the adventures of a young Puerto Rican named Rael. Part *West Side Story* and part Jean Cocteau, the story alternates between gritty realism and some of the most surreal imagery ever to find its way into pop music. A sympathetic character, Rael struggles with sexual frustration, anonymity, alienation, and isolation. On the first half of the album, "Carpet Crawler," "In This Cage," and "The Grand Parade of Lifeless Package" suggest someone who's caught up in the rat race, but we're not talking about the man in a gray flannel suit here. Rael's rat race, it seems safe to assume, includes real honest-to-god rats. Instead of daydreaming during a board meeting, Rael is busy spray-painting subways, getting into knife fights, and starting gasoline fires. The "needles and pins" Gabriel sings about in "Broadway Melody of 1974" lead one to suspect that the story's main character is shooting narcotics into his veins.



On the first half of the album, gritty realistic details combined with numerous pop culture references help ground the listener. During the second half, however, things get more abstract, and at times it seems like Rael is drowning in a sea of symbols. To me, at least, the songcraft has always seemed less consistent on the last two sides of *The Lamb*, suggesting that musically the band was running out of steam. Having spent some quality time with the Analogue Productions remastered vinyl, however, I now find myself more engaged with

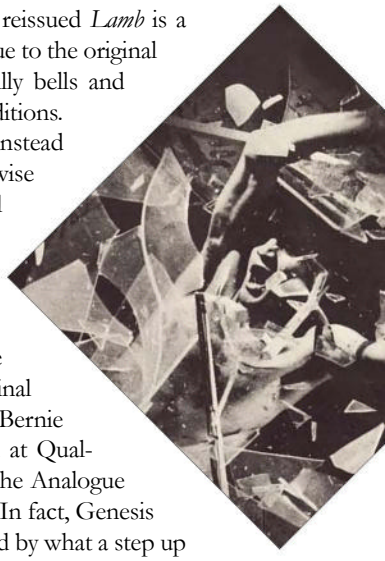


the second half and hence the album as a whole. I'll explain why, but first I want to discuss the packaging for the reissue, which enhanced an already impressive design.

Analog Productions Meets *The Lamb*

The design team known as Hipgnosis created more than 300 album covers between 1968 and 1983. Their covers always contained an air of mystery; often they suggested an implied hidden message, the most famous example being the icon on Led Zeppelin's *Presence* (people are still trying to figure out what that means). For *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, Hipgnosis provided imagery for the front and back covers, the inside of the gatefold, and the inner sleeves. With Gabriel's guidance, the design team took photographs that echoed the storyline, and the imagery and design do an excellent job of setting the tone for the record. It bears mentioning that Gabriel's short story, which appears on the inside of the gatefold cover and both echoes and illuminates the lyrics, is an interesting work of fiction that's enhanced by the layout.

I point all this out because it seems to me that Analogue Productions did a superb job of adjusting the original cover to accommodate the fact that the albums changed from two LPs (33rpm) to four LPs (45rpm). Rather than cram two discs into two album sleeves or create a box set, the AP *Lamb* has separate sleeves for all four discs, which is much more user-friendly than the alternative. The AP front and back cover look the same as the original album cover, although there's thicker cardboard to accommodate not one inside gatefold but three—one for the story and two for the lyrics. Original the lyrics appeared on paper sleeves; now poly inner sleeves house each platter, eliminating the possibility of paper scuffs. Ultimately, the reissued *Lamb* is a smart-looking package that stays true to the original design and avoids some of the silly bells and whistles that plague some deluxe editions.



Opting for four 45rpm discs instead of two 33rpm platters was also a wise decision. On the 33rpm original of the album, two sides exceed 24 minutes while the shortest clocks in at 22 and change—which is a recipe for groove compression. The reissue was mastered directly from the original master tape by Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman Mastering and pressed at Quality Record Pressings. The result? The Analogue Productions edition is far superior. In fact, Genesis fans may be startled by what a step up this is from the 1974 editions; I know I was. The AP *Lamb* is more open-sounding than my early US and UK pressings and boasts a wider dynamic range and more tonal accuracy. It's also a much quieter pressing with more presence.

Those are technical details, but ultimately the payoff is emotional. I mention this because, when I heard the AP "Carpet Crawlers" for the first time, I wasn't thinking about sonics; I was too taken by the music. It gave me goosebumps, and that happened at other points as well. Often the songs I heard with fresh ears were the quiet ones, including material on the second half of the album. Clocking in at almost seven minutes, "The Lamia" is mostly spare and quiet. Banks' acoustic piano and Gabriel's voice are the focus of attention for much of the song. The lyrics describe in great detail the main character's encounter with "three vermillion snakes of female face" that nibble his flesh. I don't know what to make of all that, but still I connect with the music.

I realized, after hearing the record with fresh ears, that it's more consistent and more amazing than I previously thought.

After the album was finished, Collins noted sections where the band was "still very much a unified five-piece." No argument there, and the combination of a strong band chemistry with solid songcraft makes for powerful music. Throughout most of "The Lamia," there's an eerie tension that's heightened by the quiet surfaces of the vinyl and a strong sense of presence, especially with Gabriel's voice. The tension doesn't resolve until Steve Hackett breaks into a guitar solo that continues until the song fades out. His solo is straightforward—no shredding or pyrotechnics—and the effect is majestic and mesmerizing. While listening to the climax of the song, I hear a band that's totally in synch, including Peter Gabriel, whose flute overdubs during the outro make it sound like he's following his bandmates and Rael down a hole. *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* isn't perfect, and parts of it are still over my head. I realize now, though, after hearing the record with fresh ears, that it's more consistent and more amazing than I previously thought. tas

MUSIC ●●●◐○ SONICS ●●●●○

Kacey Musgraves: *Deeper Well.* Interscope/MCA Nashville.

This follow-up to Musgraves' melancholy 2021 divorce album *Star-Crossed* is almost chipper in comparison. Almost. Musgraves still leans on the heartfelt, introspective ballads that fans have grown accustomed to since 2018's critically acclaimed *Golden Hour*, the LSD-fueled recording that garnered Grammys for Album of the Year and three other categories. *Deeper Well* has a golden-hour aura, with psychedelia embellishing "Anime Eyes." But for the most part these tender ballads are built around positive self-refection and delicate finger-picked acoustic guitar with sparse use of electronics. Such songs as "Giver/Taker" and "Too Good to Be True" ponder the risky nature of love and the fickleness of fame—"Lonely Millionaire" might set fans pondering the identity of the protagonist. But the emotional title track sets the mood for the recording's meditative vibe as Musgraves sings, "I'm saying goodbye to all the people that waste my time/No regrets." Musgraves sings of simple things ("Dinner with Friends") and finds deep meaning in everyday life ("The Heart of the Woods"). Musically, such songs as "Heaven Is" and "Nothing to Be Scared Of" evoke a consistent tone that is comfortable, if not always comforting. **Greg Cahill**

Further Listening: Kelsea Ballerini: *Unapologetically*; Kacey Musgraves: *Golden Hour*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Mark Knopfler: *One Deep River.* Blue Note/EMI.

The rock troubadour returns. Mark Knopfler got a lot of press earlier this year after auctioning axes from his prized guitar collection for a stunning $11 million. Now he's reunited with his ace band (and producer Guy Fletcher). *One Deep River* has the same sort of richly rendered Americana musings that marked such other solo albums as 2000's *Sailing to Philadelphia*. Closer to home, *One Deep River* finds the restive Brit inspired by crossing the Tyne River in Newcastle, England, near his childhood home. The cinematic lyrics buoy nostalgic tales of railroads ("Before My Train Comes"), restless souls ("One Deep River"), soul-sucking work ("Black Tie Jobs"), and Nashville bar bands ("Ahead of the Game"). The pace is unhurried, the mood wistful. The trademark sonics straddle the stratosphere. At times, Knopfler casts an eerie spell, as on the Celtic-tinged blue-collar soliloquy "Sweeter Than Rain." But he also cuts loose—the snarling "Scavenger Yard" opens with a high-energy guitar barrage and speaks of a marginal life on "the killing floor." And he dishes a funky blues shuffle on "Two Pairs of Hands," a nod to the late J.J. Cale. Just be glad Knopfler didn't auction *all* of his guitars. **GC**

Further Listening: Mark Knopfler: *The Studio Albums 2009–2018*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●○○

Norah Jones: *Visions.* Blue Note.

Long gone are the days when Norah Jones relied on a coterie of writers to provide her with mostly slow, serious ballads that showcased her sultry voice. For the past few albums, Jones has written or cowritten the bulk of her material, showcasing a style that's lighter both lyrically and musically. Continuing this trend, *Visions* is an album of minor consequence but major enjoyment. The material may not require a deep emotional investment, nor behoove one to scrutinize its romance-related lyrics, but it will reward the listener with hummable songs that pleasantly lodge themselves in your cranium. One thing that hasn't changed over the years is Jones' bewitching half-whispered, half-sung singing style. That style has which been appropriated—and exaggerated—by Billie Eilish and others. But Jones, the original, could sing the phone book and I would gladly listen. Unfortunately, another long-gone factor is the remarkably natural sound of Jones' first two albums. Both are now audio show and home demo staples, and for good reason; they're uncompressed and exceedingly pure. *Visions*, in contrast, is tonally anemic, and even distorted at times. The music doesn't disappoint; but the sound sure does. **Alan Taffel**

Further Listening: Norah Jones: *Come Away with Me*; Billie Eilish: *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?*

Introducing
CONCORDE MUSIC
MOVING MAGNET CARTRIDGES

It is all about
THE MUSIC

ORTOFON INC
500 Executive Blvd, Suite 102, Ossining, NY 10562
914.762.8646 · info@ortofon.us · ortofon.com

ortofon
accuracy in sound

TURNBULL AUDIO POWER REFINED

The Timeless Quest

ULTIMATE CONNECTION BETWEEN MUSICIAN AND PATRON

The Voice That Is
www.thevoicethatis.com

Hi-End Theater & Audio
www.hi-endaudio.com

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Pearl Jam: *Dark Matter.* Monkeywrench.

It's impressive to learn that, three decades into their career, Pearl Jam can still summon the passion for *Dark Matter*, their 12th record. The album lacks an overall theme, but that works in its favor as its streamlined sonics and hard rock edge echo the band's early records with throwback ferocity. The opening barrage of "Scared of Fear" and "React, Respond" crackles with the frantic crunch of Stone Gossard and Mike McCready's steely twin guitars. Recorded in just three weeks in LA, this fiery collection burns with immediacy from the angular push/pull rhythms of the title track to the punk assault of "Running." Matt Cameron's powerhouse drumming both anchors the band and launches them forward. After a few decades, it's easy to take Pearl Jam's muscular chops for granted, but their tight arrangements and collaborative dynamics truly are exceptional. Let's save the band's best element for last: Eddie Vedder's iconic baritone still mesmerizes with a gravitas that only deepens with age. No matter the lyrics, Eddie emotes—and you feel it deep in your chest. Check out the midtempo and melodic "Wreckage" and the rousing closer, "Setting Sun," where Vedder's voice and a few acoustic chords swell these songs into anthems. **Greg Gaston**

Further Listening: Joey Ramone: *Don't Worry About Me*; Pete Townshend: *Scoop*; Pearl Jam: *Ten*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Kim Gordon: *The Collective.* Matador.

Since the early 2010s, Kim Gordon's work both as a solo artist and through her duo Body/Head presents the experimental musician exploring abstract textures that deconstruct the genres she pulls from. *The Collective* is no exception, an abrasive album that feels like pop, trap, and noise that's been smashed to pieces and reformed into a collage. While the singles were intriguing in their own right, the album is most effective when its experienced all at once, starting at the top and letting Gordon's sonic barrage obliterate your senses until an ending which perfectly loops back to the start of the record. Her vocals throughout cavalierly float on top of the chaos ("BYE BYE," "I'm A Man"), conveying themes of alienation and unrest within contemporary society over low, distorted synths and guitars. Gordon's guitar work comes in brash bursts, interjections that slice into the texture ("It's Dark Inside," "Tree House," "The Believers"). The album comes to a head on the final track, which springs forward with a propulsive bass line before gradually deflating as if finally collapsing in exhaustion. *The Collective* is an unsettling record that is incessantly confrontational, yet I always want it to loop back to the beginning when it ends. **Hannah Blanchette**

Further Listening: Kim Gordon: *No Home Record*; Moor Mother: *The Great Bailout*; Oneohtrix Point Never: *Again*

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●○

Mike Zito: *Life Is Hard.* Gulf Coast.

After losing his beloved wife of 20 years to pancreatic cancer last year, Mike Zito posted on his personal blog about an album then in progress and the impossibility of him writing "lots of new songs about this journey with Laura." Not so, he asserted: "I wouldn't even know how to write songs about what we are going through now. I am lucky I can walk through it let alone sing about it." *Life Is Hard*, co-produced by Joe Bonamassa and Josh Smith, is that album, and it's deep. Only two of its 11 tunes are Zito originals, and an informed listener would be hard-pressed not to hear those as reflections on the journey and the love he shared with Laura, not given the anguished howl and searing guitar solo he emits on the string-burnished soul ballad "Forever My Love," or the plaintive existential crisis he limns in the heartbeat pulse of "Without Loving You" ("Tell me how am I gonna live/Without loving you"). Questions of life, love, and partings haunt the intense covers of songs by Tinsley Ellis, Stevie Wonder, Tab Benoit, and others. And Zito's vocals? Naked, from an artist unburdening himself physically and metaphysically. Walk with him through it. **David McGee**

Further Listening: Joe South: *Midnight Rainbows*; Dale Watson: *Every Song I Write Is for You*

music hall

S T E A L T H

THE SILENT POWER OF PRECISION

Meet The Stealth: Music Hall's direct-drive turntable, the perfect blend of high-end performance and affordability. Its expertly engineered motor and balanced platter ensure accuracy with every spin. Coupled with a precision-focused tonearm and the acclaimed Ortofon 2M Blue cartridge, the Stealth delivers pure, unmistakable sonic clarity. The Stealth: You won't even know it's there—until the music plays.

"This is a workhorse... it sounds fantastic, it's amenable to tweaks and other improvements, and it has a genuine, high-end turntable sound." - Marc Phillips [Part Time Audiophile]

"The purchase of a Stealth turntable could be an endpoint. It will open the door to the high-end without breaking the bank." - Guy Lemcoe [The Audio Beat]

"The Stealth's best trait was how conspicuously it carried the tune... I can think of no record player under $2,000 that I'd rather use. Or recommend." - Herb Reichert [Stereophile]

Find an Authorized Retailer or Order Online

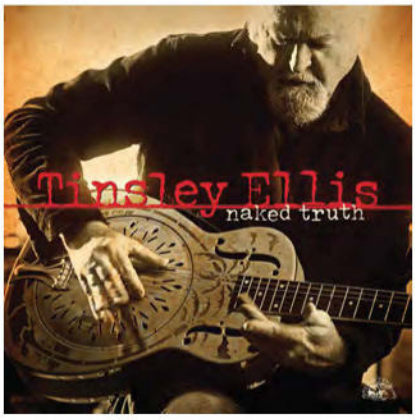
musichallaudio.com

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Brittany Howard: *What Now.* Island/UMG.

From the get-go, this much-anticipated sophomore solo album from former Alabama Shakes singer, songwriter, and guitarist Brittany Howard makes a strong declaration of intent. The opening track, "Earth Sign," begins and ends with the resonant sound of Tibetan singing bowls, which bookend declarative lyrics ("Out there/There's a love waiting for me/I can feel/I can't see") sung in a wavering tone and hovering above a blast of subwoofer-challenging bass, all tinged with psychedelic soul. Howard's 2019 solo debut, *Jaime*, was a boundary-breaking homage to her late sister and offered a chronicle of Howard's life before Alabama Shakes. *What Now* writes the next chapter. Those singing bowls set the tone and return on "Red Flags," "Samson," and the dreamy "To Be Still"—after all, the album was conceived in a sun-dappled Topanga Canyon greenhouse. But Howard is every bit the musical explorer: Such songs as "I Don't," "Prove It to You," "Power to Undo," and "Another Day" summon 70s Philly soul with a nod to Prince. The title track has a Stevie Wonder vibe. "Every Color in Blue" and "Samson" add Rod McGaha's hazy jazz trumpet to the mix. All of these seemingly disparate influences are united perfectly by Howard's boundless creativity. **GC**

Further Listening: Alabama Shakes: *Boys & Girls*; Prince: *The Rainbow Children*



MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●○

Tinsley Ellis: *Naked Truth.* Alligator.

Tinsley Ellis, normally fronting a blistering blues-rock juggernaut, has delivered a long-awaited gem: deep, potent acoustic blues, featuring Ellis, his lived-in voice, his 1937 National Steel O Series guitar, his 1969 Martin D-35 (a treasured gift from this father), and percussive flourishes provided by his clapping hands and stomping feet. Of the dozen songs, only three are covers, including a lovingly rendered version of Leo Kottke's instrumental beauty, "Sailor's Grave on the Prairie," complete with those evocative Kottke slide swoops, precision-picked single note lines, and the feel of an endless horizon in its poignant melody. Ellis also burns righteously in covering Son House's monument, "Death Letter Blues," delivered in a deep, frighteningly wounded voice spitting out the verses with unalloyed, self-lacerating fury and complementing the horror he experiences with a powerhouse guitar attack alternating between banshee-like slide howls and angry comping. His own songs assay blues styles from the Mississippi hill country (the spooky "Devil in the Room") to the Delta's dark heart in the spare Bentonia blues and wounded, upper register 12-bar lamentations of "Windowpane," with a touch of Robert Johnson's saucy humor in the lusty bounce fueling "Grown Ass Man." Blues album of the year? You read it here first. **DM**

Further Listening: R.L. Burnside: *Acoustic Stories*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Adrianne Lenker: *Bright Future.* 4AD.

"Just when I thought I couldn't feel more/I feel a little more," sings the singer-songwriter Adrianne Lenker in her signature, trembling warble over the fragile fingerstyle guitar of "Free Treasure." That phrase succinctly sums up the experience of listening to *Bright Future*, a folk gem that builds upon the introspection and sorrow of her previous release, *songs and instrumentals* (2020). Lenker's recent pursuits both as a solo artist and through her work with the esteemed indie rock group, Big Thief, have dug deeper into her country and Americana inclinations. *Bright Future* feels intimate from the first second of muted piano, room sound, and Lenker's voice direct in the microphone. This opening track sets the stage with its free, stream-of-consciousness delivery of heart-wrenching thoughts ("I thought of dying unprepared"). Not every track on *Bright Future* takes this sparse, meandering approach. Some display a lusher folk instrumentation ("Sadness as a Gift," "Evil," "Already Lost") or upbeat, driving tempos ("Vampire Empire"). Lenker masterfully creates variety throughout without departing from the album's core of confessional folk. Without fail, each song weaves together vulnerability and lilting melody, reminding me of the perennial thrill I experience listening to the lineage of revered singer-songwriters she is now firmly a part of. **HB**

Further Listening: Adrianne Lenker: *songs and instrumentals*; Florist: *Florist*

DISCOVER A NEW LEVEL OF MUSICALITY

The Ultra 6 V2 is the first Ultra product to use opposing technology pockets. Order the Ultra 6 V2 with an Ultra Base which provides an additional 20% to 25% in performance. Order without the Ultra Base if used in an ESS rack or with a Component Stand.

Unlock the music that has been missing from your system. Contact us to schedule a free in-home trial!

Editors' Choice 2024 includes:
Stillpoints Aperture II Panels
Stillpoints ESS and ESS Turntable Rack
Stillpoints UltraMini V2, UltraSS V2, Ultra5 V2, Ultra6 V2, LPI V2.

To learn more visit our new website: www.stillpoints.us

Stillpoints™

rose

The Ultimate Streaming Transport

HiFi Rose RS130
Network Transport

Available at

musicdirect®

312-433-0200 | www.musicdirect.com

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Julia Holter: *Something in the Room She Moves.* Domino.

Julia Holter's latest album *Something in the Room She Moves* evokes afternoon sunlight, safety, and warmth, and is a singular internal journey through life's range of emotions. Creating a follow-up to her 2018 magnum opus *Aviary* (a truly triumphant and experimental album) would naturally be difficult, but especially so after a pandemic, the birth of a child, and who knows what other drastic life changes. The album goes in a rather different direction, and features strong jazz influences, heard especially in the upright bass, saxophones, and flutes highlighted on over half of the tracks. Holter isn't afraid to explore space and extremes, and in fact, near silences pepper the record as well as dense Holter-esque chords and cacophonous swells. Besides a foray into jazz, she also leans once more into her modern compositional side with the ambient instrumental track "Ocean" and one song, "MeYou," that feels reminiscent of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Stimmung*. The opening three songs are the strongest of the album (and feel the most like "songs"), and due to its experimental nature, the record certainly requires a particular setting and mood. It occupies yet another, and entirely unique space within Holter's discography, one that asks and seeks reflection, stillness, and wonder. **Jerika Hayes**

Further Listening: Alice Coltrane: *Journey in Satchidananda*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Pernice Brothers: *Who Will You Believe.* New West.

Based in Toronto, Canada, Joe Pernice has been writing and performing exquisite chamber pop with the Pernice Brothers for 25 years. On his latest album, *Who Will You Believe*, Joe's literate vision, accomplished songwriting, and tender tenor combines with lush arrangements that include, on some tracks, strings, horns, and the choral group Choir! Choir! Choir! With its chiming guitar and melodic urgency, the title song reflects Pernice's poetic ambiguity with the elegant lines, "I fell in love with the possible world/Then I smashed my heart against the stones." Pernice's narrators in song often ramble in unreliable, lovelorn, and disillusioned mini-monologues. "What We Had" unfurls with a languid grace; this stately ballad of regret crests with a lilting guitar solo by Peyton Pinkerton. Neko Case duets with Pernice on the twangy, midtempo "I Don't Need That Anymore," as they trade the witty barbs of ex-lovers. Pernice ends with the aching coda, "The Purple Rain," a lovely acoustic elegy to David Berman of Purple Mountains, a musician friend who took his own life several years ago. The hushed horns and choral refrain enhance Pernice's sophisticated arrangements with emotional resonance and clarity, an intimate dynamic that courses through *Who Will You Believe*. **GG**

Further Listening: Matthew Sweet: *100% Fun*

MUSIC ●●●◐○ SONICS ●●●●○

Nico: *The Marble Index.* Elektra/Domino (LP).

Nico's performances on the first Velvet Underground album were pure magic. And while the plush arrangements on her first solo album, 1967's *Chelsea Girl*, were theoretically at odds with her Teutonic gravitas of her voice, that LP was also quite memorable. Nico's second solo album, *The Marble Index* (1968), marked a significant departure. Where she previously interpreted Lou Reed, Jackson Browne, Bob Dylan, and other songwriters, Nico was now the sole composer. The music has a dronelike quality and a *Sturm und Drang* vibe, and I can understand why it resonates with goth fans. For me it's more of a mixed bag, but my reservations are based on musical choices rather than the mood of the record. During the recording sessions, the first layer usually consisted of Nico's voice and harmonium; ex-VU bandmate John Cale later added some angular and dissonant overdubs (no complaints there). On the harmonium-free cuts—like "No One Is There," where Nico is accompanied by a string quartet, and the a cappella performance of "Nibelung," which appears on the 7-inch that accompanies this vinyl reissue—the music casts a dark, seductive spell, and sometimes the overdubs provide enough of a distraction to keep the harmonium from dominating. Not always, though. **Jeff Wilson**

Further Listening: Irene Papas: *Odes*; Björk: *Utopia*; Annette Peacock: *X-Dreams*

LEARN SOME COOL STUFF ON OUR YouTube

HI-FIDELITY MUSIC SYSTEMS
Upscale Audio
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

SEE CUSTOMER SYSTEMS ON OUR Instagram

FYNE AUDIO
Vintage Classic XII
Floorstanding Loudspeaker
***$11,799** (pair)*

A 12" IsoFlare driver surrounds a 75 mm titanium dome tweeter, this speaker brings the 1970s into the 2020s. Made in Scotland by the masters of point-source technology.

PRIMALUNA
EVO 300 Hybrid
Tube Integrated Amplifier
$6995

The best of tubes and the best of solid-state in a fully dual-mono design loaded with top-shelf components and sophisticated power supplies.

CABASSE
ABYSS + Java MC40
Wireless Amplifier + Loudspeakers
***$3469** (system)*

One of Upscale's famous killer bundles. The streaming amp has factory-matched DSP for the speakers, resulting in breathtaking performance.

T+A ELEKTROAKUSTIK
MP 200
Multi Source Streamer / CD Player
$5900

Whether FM, CD, internet streaming, or Bluetooth, this player brings true high-fidelity to all sources. Pair it with the T+A DAC 200 for a perfectly integrated digital front-end.

HANA
Umami Blue
Moving Coil Cartridge
$2500

Another gem from master designer Maseo Okada-san. CNC'd from Duralumin with a precision-cut diamond stylus and a boron cantilever.

FYNE AUDIO
SuperTrax
Supertweeter
***$4799** (pair)*

This omnidirectional supertweeter eliminates the narrowly focused beam directionality of traditional designs, offering total 3D immersion in a vast soundstage.

SBOOSTER
AIB Bluesound NODE
Connection Kit
$523.99

New for 2024: Add this internal power supply board and linear power supply to your Bluesound NODE for a better, quieter level of sonic performance.

Free Expert Setup

Just check a box and have a leading analog expert set up and test your turntable! We will install and align the cartridge, set up and align the tonearm, test and adjust speed, top up bearing oil, and more. Our experts use high-tech tools, but always do final testing by ear. All settings are documented and labeled to make it easy to unpack your table and start rocking.

0% APR for 36 Months*

Check your rate in seconds at upscaleaudio.com without affecting your credit score.

*Subject to approval of credit application. Rates range from 0% to 29.99% APR. APRs will vary depending on credit qualifications, loan amount, and term.

EXPERT ADVICE. EXCLUSIVE DEALS. NEW & USED.

UPSCALEAUDIO.COM 909.931.9686

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●◐

Chris Potter: *Eagle's Point.* Edition.

The most technically gifted and authoritative tenor sax voice since Michael Brecker joins longtime comrades Brad Mehldau on piano, John Patitucci on bass, and Brian Blade on drums to form a modern-day super group on *Eagle's Point*, Potter's 25th album as a leader. Given their history together, going back to the 90s, their chemistry is evident through all eight tracks. "Dream of Home" opens with Mehldau's sparse, delicate piano statements before the piece builds to a dynamic showcase of masterful counterpoint and swaggering tenor. The all-out swinger, "Cloud Message," paced by Blade's insistent ride cymbal work and syncopated flash around the kit and Patitucci's unerring pulse, is a launching pad for Potter's post-bop tenor heroics while Mehldau channels his inner Bud Powell on an inspired solo. The mellow and melodic "Indigo Ildikó" finds the leader emoting beautifully on bass clarinet while the lovely brushes ballad "Aria for Anna" captures him in a relaxed, lyrical mood on soprano sax, conjuring up a reverie reminiscent of John Coltrane's "Central Park West." The title track presents a polyrhythmic puzzle that the team jointly solves, and they close on a buoyant note with the irresistible, Latin-flavored *Horizon Dance*. A superb outing. **Bill Milkowski**

Further Listening: Chris Potter: *Unspoken*; *Got the Keys to the Kingdom*; John Coltrane: *Coltrane's Sound*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Cory Weeds Meets Champian Fulton: *Every Now And Then.* Cellar Live (LP).

NYC vocalist/pianist Champian Fulton and Vancouver saxophonist Cory Weeds recorded this album for a studio audience, and the resultant spontaneity and musicality is a delight. Champian's exceptional swing feel and joyful nature simmers throughout, and Cory's warm and precise tone on the alto sax is a glorious constant. At times the bebop-inspired piano/sax melodies played in unison become punctuating introductions which frame the songs. Some highlights include "Linger in My Arms," with a sultry laidback groove, and the Cole Porter standard "It's Alright with Me," which begins with Champian expertly defining what the term rubato means as she sings "It's not his face/ Ah, but such a charming face" before the tune kicks into a flying free tempo where both musicians burn. Composed by Champian, the instrumental "That's Not Your Donut" makes for an energized musical banter between the two friends, and there's ample room for each of them to shine individually in their solo improvisations. On occasion the vocal reverb compromises the sound somewhat when Champian belts out certain phrases, but the singing is note perfect with artistic dynamics and spot-on articulation. The 180-gram vinyl is beautifully pressed with a clean and quiet surface. **Karin Plato**

Further Listening: Champian Fulton: *Meet Me at Birdland*; *Birdsong*

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●◐

Julian Lage: *Speak to Me.* Blue Note.

Don't fence him in. This 12th album from 36-year-old Grammy-winning jazz-guitar wiz Julian Lage may confound some listeners, since it opens with the pastoral "Hymnal" before stepping into the pulsing country-blues of "Northern Shuffle," which is all jagged guitar riffs, staccato saxophone licks, and broken piano chords. Clearly, Americana producer Joe Henry set out to showcase Lage's versatility. And he's succeeded: The title track is a rambunctious jazz instrumental and "Two and One" features a bass solo and a swinging Romani jazz tempo, while the rest of the album leans into such relaxing fare as the pretty ballad "Serenade," the country-centric "Omission," and the folksy "South Mountain." "Tiburon" shadows the spark of "Northern Shuffle," but with a richer display of dynamics. The closer, "Nothing Happens Here," is a whistle-ready melodic gem. All this diversity feeds a potpourri of sound and creates a sonic travelogue of American music, unlike Lage's more consistently programmed albums, like 2022's Bill Frisell collaboration *View with a Room* and 2015's *Free Flying* with pianist Fred Hersch. That said, *Speak to Me* is bigger than the sum of its parts, thanks to 13 tracks that reflect Lage's unbridled curiosity and Joe Henry's command of American music and tasteful production. **Greg Cahill**

Further Listening: Julian Lage: *Love Hurts*; Nels Cline & Julian Lage: *Room*

Is it master tape or is it Safir 9?

40 years continuous revolution

KUZMA

Exclusive USA distributor: Elite Audio Video Distribution, Glendale, CA / 818-245-6037
www.eliteavdist.com; scot@eliteavdist.com

Selected US dealers: Upscale Audio, La Verne, CA 91750 / 909-931-9686, kat@upscaleaudio.com
MoFi Distribution, 1811 W Bryn Mawr Ave, Chicago, IL 60660, norberts@mofi.com

hi-fi+ WINNER 2022

Kuzma Ltd, Slovenia • www.kuzma.si • kuzmaltd@siol.net

UNITED HOME AUDIO
WASHINGTON DC • VIRGINIA • MARYLAND
540-295-8313 • audio@unitedhomeproducts.com

2023 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

2021 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

YOU THINK YOUR AUDIO SYSTEM SOUNDS GOOD NOW?

ADD A SUPERDECK AND BE TRANSPORTED TO THE ORIGINAL PERFORMANCE!

SOUNDINGS
FINE AUDIO VIDEO

MAGICO IN COLORADO
Exclusively at Soundings Fine Audio Video

soundingshifi.com
9625 East Arapahoe Road | +1 (303) 759 - 5505
Unit L, Greenwood Village, Colorado 80112

TAKE 5 AUDIO

MOON
by SIMAUDIO

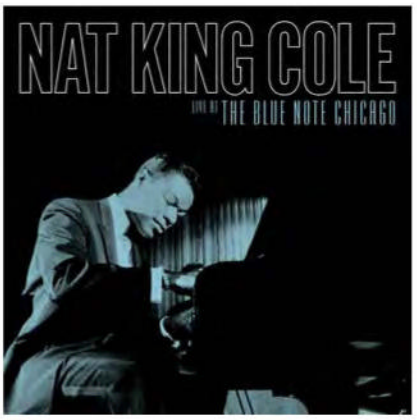
Explore New Frontiers

The landmark NORTH Collection represents the culmination of years of research and development in the fields of audio, electronics, materials, and manufacturing processes.

Its exciting new look is surpassed only by improvements in performance made possible by the passionate team of Simaudio engineers and technicians dedicated to delivering an uncompromised music listening experience.

@take5audio

www.take5audio.com
(203) 777-1750
1101 Southford Rd, Middlebury CT 06762



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Nat King Cole: ***Live at the Blue Note Chicago.*** Iconic (2 LPs).

Nat King Cole played jazz piano professionally since he was a teenager in the late 1930s. A few years later, he pioneered the small jazz ensemble format that would eventually supplant the big band era, but for most music lovers this is a historical sidebar to Cole's work as a pop singer. This wonderful 2-LP live recording of a 1953 nightclub session in Chicago catches Cole at that transition in his career; he sings on every cut, but from the piano, joined by John Collins on guitar, Charlie Harris on bass, and Lee Young at the drum set. The set includes many of Cole's big hits, such as "Mona Lisa," "Nature Boy," and "Route 66," plus a bunch of standards (his rendition of "Love is Here to Stay" is especially touching). The mono sound is dynamically compressed, which dulls the bass and deprives the guitar and piano of sparkle, but Cole's baritone is right in the sweet spot, and has palpable presence. Despite the less than stellar sound quality, the swinging drive and virtuosity of the band is terrific, and the ambience of an engaged, boozy club crowd adds zest to what must have been an "unforgettable" evening indeed, as the famous song title goes. **Peter Burwasser**

Further Listening: Nat King Cole: *After Midnight*; Frank Sinatra: *Live in Australia, 1959*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Art Tatum: ***Jewels In the Treasure Box.*** Resonance (3 LPs).

The virtuosity of pianist Art Tatum set a new standard for jazz when he hit New York in 1932, not just for other pianists but for all jazz instrumentalists. Mostly known for his solo recordings, Tatum also worked frequently in a trio with bass and guitar, those chairs being filled here by Slam Stewart and the sadly underrated Everett Barksdale. Tatum reined in his explosive style in this context, but even so his playing is almost relentless, barely letting up even during his sidemen's solos. The repertoire leans heavily on familiar standards from the Great American Songbook. He tends towards breathtaking variations and embellishments of the tunes, rather than improvising new melodic lines, but on jazz tunes like the Charlie Christian-Benny Goodman burner "Air Mail Special," Tatum shows that he could build hot swing solos with the best of them. Heard here in one of his favorite clubs in the summer of 1953, Tatum is at his relaxed best, and the audio quality is surprisingly good, despite a little inevitable background noise and imperfect balance. Add the exemplary production values we expect from Resonance Records and you have a set that will get a lot of votes for the archival jazz release of 2024. **Duck Baker**

Further Listening: Art Tatum: *God Is in the House; Piano Starts Here*

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●○○

Alice Coltrane: ***The Carnegie Hall Concert.*** Impulse! (2 LPs).

On February 21, 1971, a week after the release of her iconic *Journey in Satchidananda*, pianist/harpist/composer Alice Coltrane appeared at Carnegie Hall. Coltrane (aka Turiya) put together a band of 60s avant-garde masters: Pharoah Sanders (saxophones, flute, fife, percussion), Archie Shepp (saxophones, percussion), Cecil McBee and Jimmy Garrison (basses), and Ed Blackwell and Clifford Jarvis (drums), plus Tulsi Reynolds (tamboura) and Kumar Kramer (harmonium). The 80-minute set comprised four pieces (each occupies an LP side), moving from the leader's recent devotional music—the cosmic, contemplative, harp-swathed "Journey in Satchidananda" and "Shiva-Loka"—to the piano-propelled "Africa" and "Leo," composed by her late husband, John Coltrane. The sound, remastered from Michel's 2-track "reference mix" (the 4-track masters having disappeared), is a bit uneven, but the performances are epic. Sanders and Shepp, on flute and soprano saxes, are suitably meditative on the first two tracks, and explosively frenzied on tenors playing Trane's energy music. The drummers and bassists drive the proceedings and get room to stretch out, but, especially on the climactic "Leo," it's Turiya's powerful Tyner-esque piano that is the set's biggest revelation. **Derk Richardson**

Further Listening: Alice Coltrane: *Ptah, The El Daoud*

Another Great usedcable.com

Plug into our 30 years of high-end cable expertise

- 1 Year Warranty
- 30 Day No Hassle Exchange
- Free Shipping over $50
- Free System Consultation

usedcable.com **800-328-9973**
usedcable@usedcable.com

UsedCable.com is a trusted Cable Company joint

the absolute sound.com

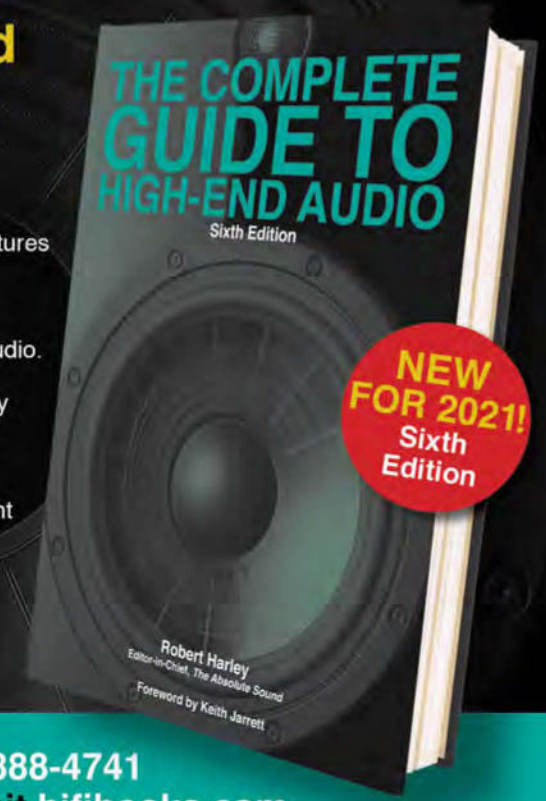
New mobile-friendly design
Browse thousands of equipment reviews
Discover new audiophile quality music
Get web exclusive content including "first look" reviews

The Best Book on High-End Audio Just Got Better!

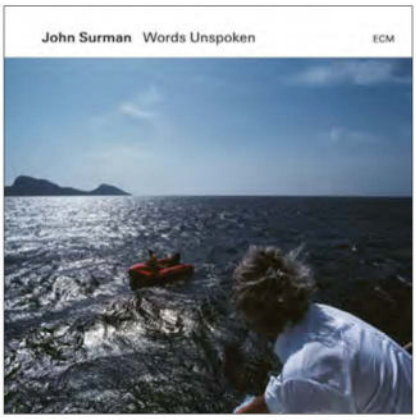
The Latest Information
Completely revised and expanded with the latest information on streaming, music servers, networking products, the latest DAC features and technologies, the vinyl revolution, and much more.

What a Record!
- Since 1994, the world's best-selling book on high-performance audio.
- More than 200,000 copies sold in five languages
- Critically acclaimed worldwide as the essential reference for every music lover.

A few of the secrets you will learn:
- High-end sound on a budget; how to do it cheap and still do it right
- Five system set-up mistakes and how to avoid them
- How to make your speakers sound up to 50% better—at no cost
- How to join the high-res streaming revolution
- How to get the best sound for music and home theater
- How to find the one speaker in 50 worth owning



Call Toll-Free for Your Copy Today! 800 888-4741
$44.95 plus shipping and handling or visit hifibooks.com



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

John Surman: *Words Unspoken.* ECM.

John Surman's first ECM album as a leader dates back almost a half-century, and 20 albums later he's still seeking out fresh new settings. True to form, his newest album, *Words Unspoken*, marks the first time Surman has brought together the talents of vibraphonist Rob Waring, guitarist Rob Lugt, and drummer Thomas Strønen. Alternating between soprano saxophone, baritone saxophone, and bass clarinet, Surman stays in the foreground for most of the record, but rather than sit back and comp, Waring and Lugt help create a three-way musical conversation while Strønen's minimalistic approach behind the kit leaves everyone plenty of breathing room. Blurring the line between soloist and accompanist (and composition and improvisation), these musicians create a musical tapestry that's often introspective and lyrical but sometimes dives into edgier territory, as on the exhilarating opener, "Pebble Dance." Throughout the record, the musical interplay is heightened by ECM's detailed and spacious recording. Shortly before hearing *Words Unspoken*, I found myself on a John Surman kick—in fact, I'd recently been spinning the copy of 1979's *Upon Reflection* that I'd purchased the week it came out—and I find it extremely affirmative that, at age 80, Surman is still carving out new territory. **Jeff Wilson**

Further Listening: John McLaughlin: *Extrapolation*; Miroslav Vitous: *First Meeting*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Musica Nuda: *Musica Nuda.* Foné.

Musica Nuda is an Italian duo consisting of Petra Magoni on vocals and Ferruccio Spinetti on double bass. There's no mystery to their moniker, as their music is about as stripped-down as it gets. Mostly the duo interprets pop songs in a jazzy style, and this eponymous LP covers a broad range of music, with highlights as diverse as Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," the Police's "Roxanne," John Lennon's "Imagine," and Jobim's "How Insensitive." Thoughtful arrangements are the rule here, as when Spinetti plays in a highly staccato arco style on The Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby"—a feature which, as you may recall, matches the original. Originally released in 2004, this all-analog debut LP for the duo was recently reissued on transparent vinyl. The engineer for the Foné label, Giulio Cesare Ricci, is fanatical about sound, and when you listen to this record you'll be struck by its intimacy, immediacy, and transparency. I love the warm and woody sound of Spinetti's bass, and I'm also fond of his solos. As a vocalist, Magoni seems so much in the moment that you'd think she was performing in front of a live audience, and her level of engagement adds something intangible to the project. A memorable album and well worth reissuing. **JW**

Further Listening: Brad Mehldau: *Your Mother Should Know*; Sheila Jordan/Harvie Swartz: *Songs from Within*

MUSIC ●●●◐○ SONICS ●●●●○

John Lurie: *Painting with John.* Royal Potato Family (2 LPs).

Many people discovered John Lurie on HBO, where the dry, off-kilter humor of *Fishing with John* and *Painting with John* took TV to strange new places. Lurie has also appeared in numerous movies, including some Jim Jarmusch films, and his paintings have hung on the walls of prestigious galleries. He's also put out quite a bit of music, including, early on, some records with the Lounge Lizards, whose postmodern spin on jazz quickly turned some heads. This 2-LP set combines music recorded specifically for the series with some earlier Lurie material that was heard on the show, and in a sense the album serves as a retrospective of John Lurie as a leader. The whimsy we associate with Lurie's TV shows is here in spades, and especially when he sings in a gravelly voice that makes you wonder if he shares some DNA with Tom Waits. But don't kid yourself: Whether Lurie and his top-tier bandmates (collaborators include Smoky Hormel, Marc Ribot, and Calvin Weston) are reconfiguring jazz, blues, Americana, or African music, these concise and quirky songs have meat on their bones. Give this record a couple spins and the melodies will stick with you—and until that happens, enjoy the wild, bumpy ride. **JW**

Further Listening: Marc Ribot: *Don't Blame Me*; The Lounge Lizards: *Queen of All Ears*

hi-fi+ Subscribe

In order to ensure prompt arrival of your copy of **hi-fi+**, it is best to take out a subscription. This lasts for a year (12 issues) and means that your magazine is delivered to your doorstep as soon as it is published. You'll never miss an issue again!

Subscription rates

One year subscription: 12 issues

Within the UK £65
Western Europe..... £80
Rest of the World..... £130

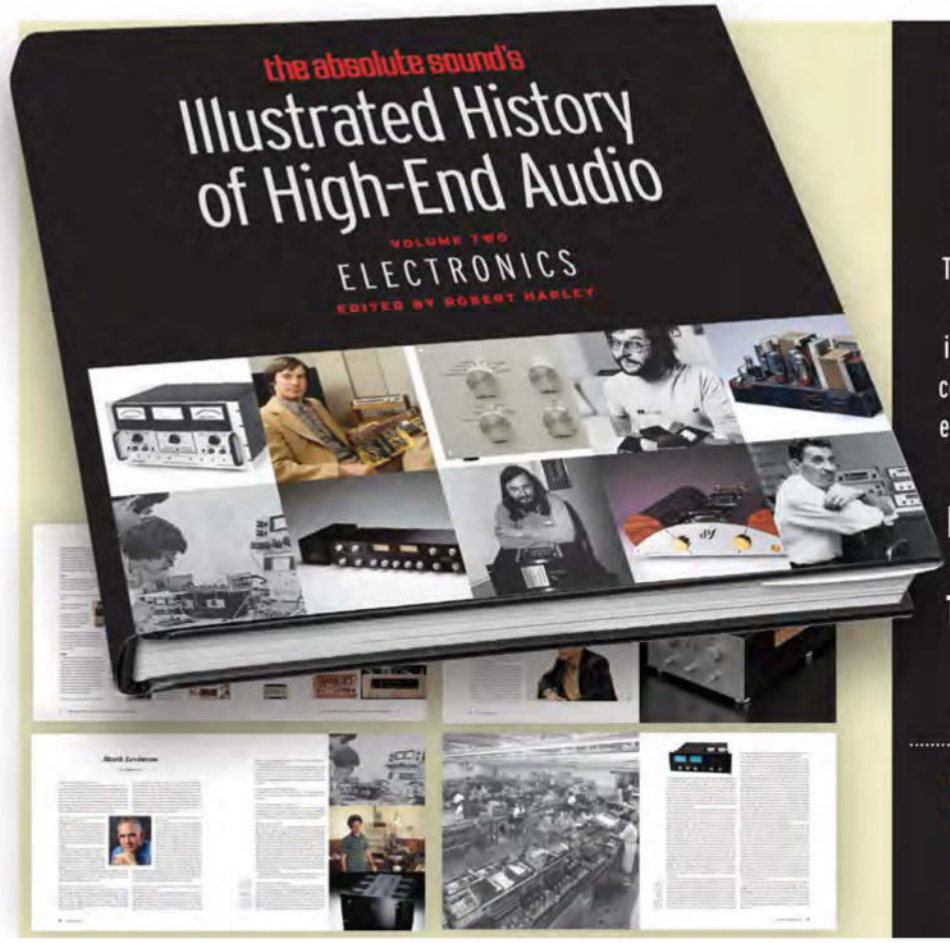
Two year subscription: 24 issues

Within the UK £120
Western Europe..... £140
Rest of the World..... £250

Contact Webscribe

telephone +44 (0)1442 820580
email contact@webscribe.co.uk

www.hifiplus.com



New TAS book!

VOLUME TWO
ELECTRONICS

The second volume in TAS' *History of High-End Audio* series, this lavishly illustrated, 336-page landmark book celebrates the high-end's most iconic electronics manufacturers, including:

97 company profiles
Exclusive new interviews
Rare archival photos
Technological and design breakthroughs
And much more!

SEE PREVIEWS AND ORDER NOW AT TASBOOK2.COM

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Ysaÿe: Six Sonatas for Solo Violin. Khachatryan. Naïve.

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●○○

Ysaÿe: *Rêves*: Violin Concerto in E Minor. *Poème concertante*. *2 mazurkas de salon*. *Rêve d'enfant*. Graffin. Kantorow, Royal Liverpool PO. Avie.

Most classical composers were—and still are—competent performers. A few were actually leading virtuosos of their day, and, as such, contributed invaluably to their instrument's repertoire. Representative keyboard players in this elite group were Chopin, Liszt, Busoni, and Rachmaninoff; violinists included Vivaldi, Paganini, Kreisler, and the great Belgian player Eugène Ysaÿe (1858–1931).

Ysaÿe's most important compositions were his six sonatas for unaccompanied violin, pieces that test both the technical and musical chops of the very best performers. There have been dozens of recordings of the complete sonatas over the past half-century, from Ruggiero Ricci (1974) to Hilary Hahn (2023)—and now this one. Ysaÿe composed each Sonata for a younger violin-playing colleague, identifying that artist's style and occasionally other aspects of the musician's character. For example, No. 6 in E Major, written for the Spanish violinist Manuel Quiroga, references habanera and tango dance forms. Dedicated to Jacques Thibaud, No. 2 in A Minor riffs on the doom-ridden *Dies irae* motive, a gentle poke at Thibaud's well-known hypochondria. Not surprisingly, J.S. Bach—who composed the greatest of all solo violin sonatas—is a touchstone, especially for No. 1 in G Minor, dedicated to Joseph Szigeti, a highly regarded Bach interpreter. All of the sonatas are supremely difficult to play, but these challenges should never obscure the musical coherence they possess.

Ysaÿe's violin for more than 30 years—he called it "the most faithful companion of my life"—was his 1640 Guarneri *del Gesù*. It was subsequently used by Isaac Stern and, from 2010 to 2022, on loan from the Nippon Music Foundation, by the Armenian violinist Sergey Khachatryan. This Naïve release is the first recording of the Sonatas on the composer's own instrument, and Khachatryan certainly does justice to the occasion. He inhabits the pieces, responding to every emotional twist and turn, and is completely unfazed by their considerable violinistic challenges. The recording is excellent, close up but not claustrophobic, and tonally rich—it's obvious that we're hearing the fuller, darker, earthier tone of a Guarneri and not a Stradivarius.

Ysaÿe never published a violin concerto, but substantial parts of several have been discovered, enough for two performable works to be realized and offered by Avie Records as first recordings. They feature the French violinist Philippe Graffin, accompanied by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Jean-Jacques Kantorow. A youthful E Minor concerto had all three movements completed by the composer, including one that was fully scored. Graffin's friend and Ysaÿe enthusiast Xavier Falques finished the job quite idiomatically. The debt owed to Mendelssohn's concerto in the same key is apparent. Of greater interest is the 23-minute, one movement *Poème concertant* that Ysaÿe began in 1893. The work is passionate and rhapsodic, and Graffin's reading is riveting, especially as supported by Erika Vega's Wagnerian orchestration. Three brief "salon pieces" close the program. Avie's sound is very good, if lacking the last word in dynamic immediacy. **Andrew Quint**

Further Listening: *The Composer-Pianists* (Hamelin)

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●◐

***The Lark*.** Jascha Heifetz, violin. RCA (LP).

At the famous 1917 American debut of Jascha Heifetz at Carnegie Hall, so the story goes, fellow violinist Mischa Elman leaned over to his friend, the great pianist and composer Leopold Godowsky and commented, "It's hot in here, don't you think?" Godowsky's reply: "Not for pianists." One of the works on the program that legendary evening was the *Chaconne* by Tomaso Vitali, in Respighi's arrangement for violin and organ. Forty years later, Heifetz made this famous recording of the same work, which is no less dazzling, and seemingly inimitable, even now. Heifetz was a champion and friend of the Italian composer Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, who wrote the Shakespeare-inspired *The Lark* for the violinist. As with the Vitali, the florid lines of the score afford a stupendous showcase for Heifetz's legendary technique, featuring astonishing agility and crystal clear, pitch perfect tone, all at the service of an elegant and thoughtful manner. The Fauré sonata, an early work from the heart of the French Romantic era, is likewise performed with an almost eerie sense of perfection. This excellent 180-gram reissue of the original RCA mono recording from Impex Records highlights the violinist's preference for close-mic recording, leaving little acoustical space around the instrument in exchange for a mesmerizingly intimate sound. **Peter Burwasser**

Further Listening: Brahms: Violin Concerto (Jascha Heifetz, CSO Orchestra/RCA)

Ad Index

Accuphase 47
accuphase.com
Acoustic Signature 73
acoustic-signature.com
American Sound of Canada 93
audiopathways.com
Analog Audio Design 61
analogaudiodesign.com
Analog Manufaktur Germany (AMG) 105
sierrasound.net
Aqua Acoustic Quality 45
aquahifi.com
AudioQuest ..... Cover II
audioquest.com
Audiovector 41
audiovector.com
Avantgarde Acoustic 93
audiopathways.com
Axiss Audio 17, 47, 89
axissaudio.com
Basis Audio 5
basisaudio.com
Bel Canto Design 113
belcantodesign.com
Cable Company 64, 65
thecableco.com
CH Precision 43
ch-precision.com
Clearaudio 19
musicalsurroundings.com
Complete Guide to High End Audio 129
hifibooks.com
Constellation 35
constellationaudio.com
Crystal Cable 21
crystalcable.com
dCS 9
dCSaudio.com
DS Audio 101
musicalsurroundings.com
Elite AV Distribution 127
eliteavdist.com
Elusive Disc 114
elusivedisc.com
Focal Naim America ..... Cover III
focalnaimamerica.com
Franco Serblin 89
francoserblin.it
Fyne Audio 25
fyneaudio.com
GoldenEar Technology 13
goldenear.com
Gryphon Audio Designs Aps 29
gryphon-audio.dk
Hana by Excel Sound 55
hanacartridges.com
Harmonia Distribution 25, 75, 85
harmoniadistribution.com
Harmonic Technology 51
harmonictech.com
HiFi Rose 27
hifirose.com
Hi-Fi+ 131
hifiplus.com
J.Sikora Turntables 77
jsikora.eu
KEF America 6, 7
kef.com
Kimber Kable 91
kimber.com
Kuzma Ltd 127
kuzma.si
Lateral Audio Stands 61
proaudio@comcast.net
LINN Incorporated 52, 53
linn.co.uk/try-linn
Lumin Music Systems 37
luminmusic.com
Luxury HiFi 79
luxuryhifidistribution.com
Magico, LLC 3
MagicoAudio.com
MBL North America, Inc. 20
mblnorthamerica.com
MoFi Distribution 27, 121
mofidistribution.com
MSB Technology 103
msbtech.com
Music Direct 59, 111, 123
musicdirect.com
Music Hall 121
musichallaudio.com
Musical Fidelity ..... Cover III
musicalfidelity.com
Musical Surroundings 19, 55, 101
musicalsurroundings.com
Neotech Marketing Group Inc 39
neotechcable.com
Nordost Corp. 33
nordost.com
Ortofon 119
ortofon.com
Paradigm 23
paradigm.com
PrimaLuna USA 75
primaluna-usa.com
Pro Audio Ltd 61
proaudioltd.com
Purist Audio Design 87
puristaudiodesign.com
Rhapsody.Audio 83
rhapsodynyc.com
Rogue Audio 59, 63
rogueaudio.com
Scott Walker Audio 107
scottwalkeraudio.com
Shunyata Research 68, 69
shunyata.com
Sierra Sound 105
sierrasound.net
Soulution 17
soulution-audio.com
Soundings HiFi 127
soundingshifi.com
Source Systems, Ltd. 37
sourcesystemsltd.com
Stillpoints 123
stillpoints.us
SVS Sound 71
svsound.com
Take 5 Audio 129
take5audio.com
TAS Illustrated History of High-End Audio 131
store.theabsolutesound.com
TAS Subscription Information ..... 109, 129, Cover IV
theabsolutesound.com
The Voice That Is 57, 63, 77, 113, 119
thevoicethatis.com
Ultra Systems 104
ultrasystems.com
United Home Audio 127
unitedhomeaudio.com
Upscale Audio 125
upscaleaudio.com
UsedCable.com 127
usedcable.com
Valve Amplification Co. (VAC) 67
vac-amps.com
Vitus Audio 49
vitusaudio.com
Wadax SA 11
wadax.eu
Wilson Audio 15
wilsonaudio.com
Wireworld Cable Technology 81
wireworldcable.com
WYNN Audio 31
wynnaudio.com

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Mahler: Symphony No. 3. London Symphony Orchestra, Horenstein. HDTT (2 CDs).

A significant number of Mahlerites consider the Unicorn Jascha Horenstein/London Symphony Orchestra version of Mahler's Third Symphony to be its best recording ever. It is on the level of Leonard Bernstein, with somewhat better sound. Few people were aware that a second recording engineered by Jerry Bruck was made simultaneously with that 1970 Unicorn recording. This is the initial release of the Bruck recording, so most listeners will be hearing it for the first time. I do not have the Unicorn recording available for immediate comparison, but I do not recall it sounding anything like this. Horenstein's tempos are for the most part fairly conventional, but he generates a level of intensity that matches Bernstein. The sublime sixth movement is a little faster than Bernstein, but Horenstein makes it sound just right. The timpani add immeasurably to the power of the finale at a seemingly perfect tempo. This is arguably the best available recording of Mahler's mammoth Third Symphony interpretively, with significantly improved sound. *Death and Transfiguration* was a Horenstein specialty that he conducted frequently. This is a good mainstream interpretation but it is not in the same class as Karajan for tonal beauty or Toscanini for power. **Arthur Lintgen**

Further Listening: Mahler: Symphony No. 3 (Bernstein/Vienna Philharmonic/DG)

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Romantic Russia. LSO, Solti. Decca (SACD).

Romantic Russia is an excellent collection of Russian music brilliantly conducted by Georg Solti. The Tchaikovsky Second Symphony was probably added to increase the playing time of the SACD despite its negligible musical value. Solti's interpretation is pretty good, but the orchestral performance is marred by some poor brass playing, especially in the fourth movement. Mussorgsky's *Khovanschina* Prelude and *Night on Bare Mountain* plus the Overture and *Polovtsian Dances* from Borodin's *Prince Igor* are all very well played in characteristically exciting fashion by Solti, though I prefer Antal Doráti's *Polovtsian Dances* on a sensational Mercury Russian collection. The principal reason to get this SACD is Solti's amazing interpretation of Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila* Overture. The orchestral performance with Solti's extremely fast tempo is in a class by itself. The combination of Solti's conducting and the London Symphony Orchestra's playing is sensational, but the ungimmicky audiophile sound will make this a definite demonstration piece for your sound system. This is a near-perfect presentation of the orchestra playing in a concert hall. In fact, the *Ruslan and Lyudmila* Overture is so good that it alone is worth the price of this SACD for its perhaps unexpected musical and sonic values. **AL**

Further Listening: Stravinsky: *The Firebird* (Dorati/Mercury)

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Dutilleux: *Tout un monde lointain.* Luxembourg Philharmonic, Gimeno. Harmonia Mundi.

Perhaps the nicest thing ever said to me was something Henri Dutilleux let slip after I spoke about Mstislav Rostropovich from the stage of the Kennedy Center on the occasion of Slava's 60th birthday. "Your remarks were thoughtful and expressive," Dutilleux confided to me in French following the concert. Precisely the words I would have used to describe Dutilleux's music, but he had beaten me to the punch! The connection here is Rostropovich, and the cello concerto Dutilleux wrote for him in 1970, *Tout un monde lontain*… (the title comes from Baudelaire's *La chevelure*). Already widely recorded—stunningly so in 1974 by Rostropovich and the Orchestre de Paris under Serge Baudo, the original interpreters—it is one of the supreme works for the instrument. While this performance, featuring cellist Jean-Guihen Queyras, is not quite as fulminant, the sonics not quite so hot, as on the recoding made by the original artists, it is brilliant nonetheless. The couplings are the Symphony No. 1 (1951) and *Métaboles* (1964), another masterpiece, whose gestures are at times reminiscent of Messiaen, Varèse, and Stravinsky, but with tonal colorations and intensities that are uniquely Dutilleux's. All in all, a splendid achievement. **Ted Libbey**

Further Listening: Britten: Suites for Cello (Queyras/HM)

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●◐

Bonis: *Entre Soir et Matin.* Sandrine Cantoreggi, violin. Sheila Arnold, fortepiano. AVI.

Mélanie Bonis was born into a conservative middle-class family in Paris in 1858, in an era when proper women were discouraged from becoming musicians. Yet her genius could not be contained, and by the age of 16 she was enrolled in César Franck's composition class, where her fellow conservatoire students included Debussy, Ravel, and Satie. As she began her professional life, she shortened her name to Mel, in order to disguise her gender. Stylistically, she was not as daring as her classmates, looking backward instead to the French romantic style of Fauré. This 2-CD collection of chamber music displays a supremely elegant and heartfelt manner. The preponderance of the program here is music for violin and piano, but there is also a flute trio and a cello trio, as well as an especially lovely work for cello and piano. Much of the material is constructed of extended and intertwined lyricism, and the young musicians on this recording deliver it with beautiful technique and relaxed pacing. Perhaps Bonis will join the ranks of previously neglected female composers who are currently undergoing revivals, such as Louise Farrenc, Florence Price, and Grażyna Bacewicz. On the basis of this splendid recording, she certainly deserves to. **PB**

Further Listening: Fauré: Piano Quintets (Nash Ensemble/CRD)

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Takács Assad Labro. Takács Quartet. Yarlung.

This release Yarlung Records hits the trifecta—engaging unfamiliar music, committed performances, and spectacular sound. Clarice Assad is a Brazilian-American composer/pianist,who moves effortlessly between classical, jazz, and popular idioms. She accompanies her own scat singing on two selections (*Luminous* and Milton Nascimento's *Cravo e Canela*) while *Constellation* for violin and piano features a touchingly songful slow movement. Completely different is the slashing, angular *Clash* for bandoneón and string quartet. Bryce Dessner's quasi-minimalist *Circles* is scored for the same forces, and Julien Labro, the album's featured bandoneón virtuoso, contributes *Meditation No. 1*, an eight-minute reverie for this instrumental grouping, as well. Kaija Saariaho's *Nocturne,* for solo violin, fits the program's aura of anxious melancholia. The Takács Quartet is approaching their semicentennial, and although only the cellist remains from the original ensemble, the group's intensity and technical fluency is intact. Yarlung's sonics are revelatory. Balances are believable, and although the recorded perspective isn't immediate, Assad's first vocal entrance on the Nascimento piece made me jump. I listened to the program as a 24/88 WAV file; a DSD version, CD, and vinyl options are also available. **AQ**

Further Listening: *Piazzolla Cien Años* (Mosalini)

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●◐

Schubert: String Quartets. Takács Quartet. Hyperion.

Topic for later consideration: Why do we hear less chamber music on the radio and in concert halls than we used to? For now: Kudos to the Takács String Quartet! Formed in Budapest in 1975—with one of the original members, cellist András Fejér, still playing—and based in the U.S. since 1983, the group has recorded widely, if not particularly adventurously (note the exception reviewed by Andrew Quint in this issue), for Hungaroton, Decca, and Hyperion, and continues to play at a very high level. The main work here is the vast and astonishing G Major Quartet. Composed in 1826, it is close-kin to the Quintet in C, D. 956, having the same expansiveness, the same three key-area first movement exposition, and speaking things utterly new to the language of chamber music—like the unearthly crescendos on long notes, and the Brucknerian tremolos played, seemingly, on a single hair of the bow. You sense, to paraphrase Stefan George's "Rapture," that you really are feeling the air of a different planet. The Takács foursome make the whole piece interesting, similarly the early B flat quartet, with a welcome unanimity of gesture and attack. Excellent sound, too… heavy breathing and foot-tapping included. **TL**

Further Listening: Schubert: *Death and the Maiden* Quartet (Takács/Hyperion); Schubert: Quartet in G (Takács/Decca/2003 recording)

It does not matter what's best for us; it matters what's best for the customer.

Q&A

Kevin Deal

Owner, Upscale Audio

Neil Gader

How and when did your interest in audio begin?

I fell in love with The Doors at age 10. I hacked my parents' console stereo with a small pair of box speakers and laid on my back, listening with my head between them, like a cheap 1968 version of planar headphones.

What inspired you to get into tubes?

At 16, I compared an old 1960s Sansui 1000A tube receiver using 7591s to the new solid-state Sansui 9090DB "Super Receiver." The 1000A is so musical! I still have three of them….somewhere. That comparison sold me on tubes.

When did audio develop from a hobby to a career?

At 18, I started working at a store named Mission Electronics, then Cal Stereo, Federated, and finally RogerSound Labs. In the 1970s, it wasn't a career but a party I could write a book about. It's hard to spend much money on your system when you need it for partying. But I did anyway.

When did you get into high-end audio?

I stopped partying at 26 and suddenly had money to upgrade my gear. It was a constant turnover. I went from a Rotel stack and Dahlquist DQM9s, ADS L810s, etc, to an Oracle Delphi turntable w/SME V tonearm, Audio Research SP9 MKI preamp (better than the MKII, IMHO), am ARC Classic 60 triode-connected amplifier, and MartinLogan CLSes. And numerous subs. That's when I went down the vintage-tube rabbit hole, spending night after night comparing 6922s and figuring out which factories really made what and how they sounded in my system. I quickly realized there is no "best" tube … just different flavors, like ice cream.

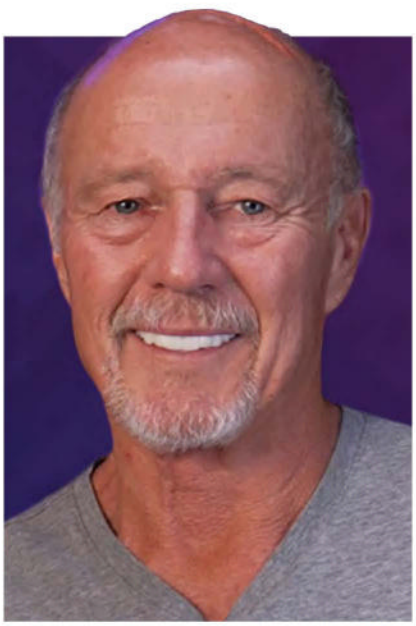
What's a dream system for you today?

I have a Pathos Synapse preamp running two pairs of Adrenaline power amps bi-amping Focal Grande Utopia, etc., etc., and love it. It's a privilege. But I'd be happy for the rest of my life if I had a PrimaLuna integrated and a good pair of speakers. It's all fun.

Did anyone in particular inspire you in this direction?

Too many to list, but Roger Cox, retired VP at Fender Musical Instruments, is an incredible mentor and an even better friend. Howard Rogers, founder of RogerSound Labs. He created a fantastic company with technically adept salespeople who didn't work on commission. I use that formula at Upscale Audio. Eliminating commission changes the relationship between the salesperson and the customer. It's about the customer and not the salesperson's bank account.

Are there any interesting trends you see on the audio horizon?



Old dudes love to talk about "back then," but there is more free-flowing creativity today than ever. Carly Simon sang it best: "These are the good old days."

What are the greatest challenges facing the high-end industry?

Dealers are tempted to flock to the extreme high end because it's a more profitable and protected market. This can mean budding audiophiles aren't exposed to high-end gear when they want to hear a pair of $4000 speakers. They just go to Best Buy. Opportunity missed.

What do you believe were the keys to your success?

It was work almost 24/7 in the early years of Upscale Audio. I remember Dennis Had [*founder of Cary Audio*] and I helping a guy who didn't speak English bias his new amp on Christmas Eve. We laughed our asses off, but we did it! I hire people better than me. I tell it like it is. We offer services like testing tubes, as if I'm using them myself, and turntable QC, even on entry-level tables. Ask customers deep questions so they don't repeat mistakes. It does not matter what's best for us; it matters what's best for the customer.

Outside of audio, what do you do for fun?

I used to ride motorcycles often, but I may be aging out…ugh. I'm a car guy with an Alfa Romeo Giulia QV and an old-school manual 2010 Porsche GT3. We go to concerts, musicals, and some dance since my wife Laura teaches ballet. We love walks with our Akita Sasha.

What inspires you about your work?

When my first wife passed away in 2005, the people, the music, and the gear kept me going. We've tried to do so in kind if we can. The relationships can be very deep. It's incredibly satisfying. I've been in the industry for 47 years, I've owned Upscale for nearly 30 of those years, and it's still exciting. There is always a new box to open, new things to learn, and an ever-widening circle of friends in the audio community. tas

MUSICAL FIDELITY

A1 | INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

The return of a true Hi-Fi classic.

A1 | INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

The A1 has one secret. This secret is simple: it makes music. It sounds sweet and fluid and creates a beautiful atmosphere around natural instruments. Especially in small to mid-sized rooms, carefully set up with a pair of great two-way speakers. It is not a powerhouse, but music lovers will cherish its abilities.

It's also not a product that you'll want to hide. A perfect example of form follows function. The oversized heatsinks define the A1's look, but they are essential for its operation. Truly unique, from the outside and inside.

$1,779

musicalfidelity.com | focalnaimamerica.com | Distributed by Focal Naim America | For more information: 1 800.663.9352 / info@focal-naim.com

the absolute sound®

Digital magazine subscription $10
Get Instant Delivery
Download & Read Offline, Anywhere
Mobile-Optimized Reading

https://www.zinio.com/the-absolute-sound-m39073

the absolute sound